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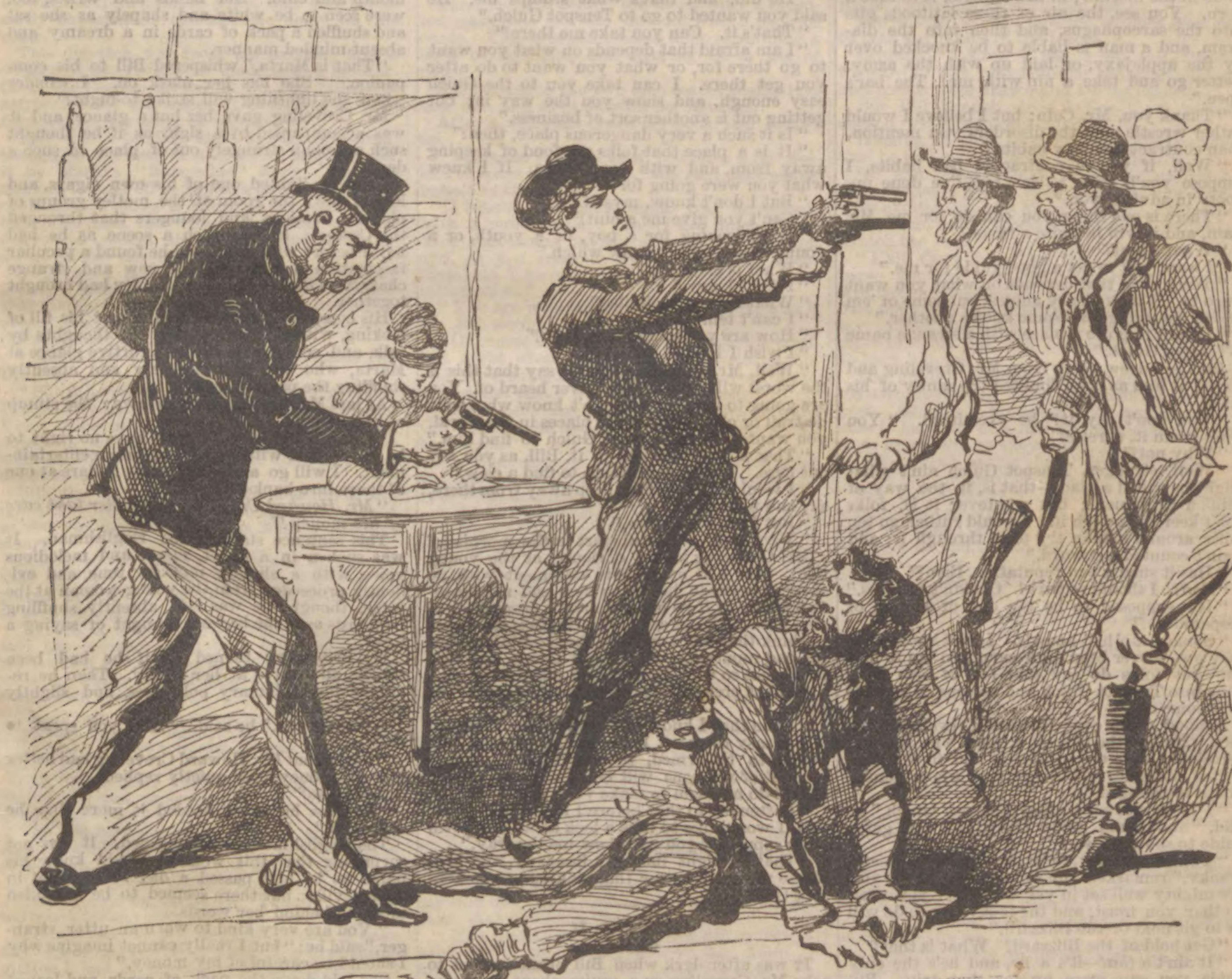
Vol. XVIII. Published Every Week. Beadle & Adams, Publishers, 98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., January 24, 1883. Ten Cents a Copy. \$5.00 a Year. No. 222

BILL, THE BLIZZARD; or, Red Jack's Double Crime.

A STORY OF THE MYSTERY OF TENSPOT GULCH.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "MISSISSIPPI MOSE," "BUCK FARLEY," ETC., ETC.



"HOLD THERE!" SHOUTED THE BLIZZARD. "FALL BACK, YOU HELLHOUNDS, OR THE PRICE OF COFFINS WILL RISE IN APACHEVILLE!"

Bill, the Blizzard;

OR,

Red Jack's Double Crime.

A Story of the Mystery of Tenspot Gulch.

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CHAPTER I.

THE MAN FROM ABROAD.

At the hotel of the Rising Sun in the rapidly-risen mining town of Apacheville, a traveler who had arrived by the night stage arose at an early hour in the morning, and walked out to view the strange and to him wonderful scenes which the locality afforded.

This traveler had registered himself at the hotel as Howard Creveling, London, England, and his appearance was sufficient to show that he was in fact an Englishman.

He was a tall and manly-looking man, a little past the meridian of life, with side whiskers tinged with gray, and a fine head bald at the forehead, and was dressed in a suit of English tweed that gave him a comfortable and gentlemanly appearance. It could not be doubted, from his air and his attire, that he was a person of wealth and standing.

As he stood on the porch, gazing at the mountains that shut in the single street of Apacheville and the scattered houses, shanties, and tents straggling up the hillsides, the landlord of the Rising Sun came out and greeted him.

The landlord was a big, burly, black-bearded man, Jim Cain by name.

"Mornin', stranger," said Jim Cain. "You're out airly."

"I wanted to take an early look at this new town of yours," replied Mr. Creveling.

"It's wuth lookin' at. Had yer bitters?"

"My what?"

"Yer tod—yer nip—yer eye-opener—yer mornin' dram?"

"Thanks, but I never drink before breakfast."

"You don't say! I've heard that the Britishers wasn't civilized; but I didn't half believe it. Why, stranger, the fust thing a man ought to do in the mornin', in this climate, is to take a horn. You see, the air of these latitoods gits into the sarcophagus, and then into the diagram, and a man is liable to be knocked over by the applejaxy, or laid up with the azmy. Better go and take a nip with me. The bar's open."

"Thank you, Mr. Cain; but I believe I would rather wrestle with the disorders you mention, than contract any new habits."

"Well, if you've contracted bad habits, I suppose you'll stick to 'em; but I've done my dooty in advisin' you."

"There is one thing you can do for me, Mr. Cain, and it will be quite a favor."

"What's that?"

"I want you to get a good guide for me."

"Well, now, that depends on whar you want to go to. Thar's plenty guides; but some of 'em knows one thing, and some knows another."

"I want to go to a place with a strange name—Tenspot Gulch."

Jim Cain drew away from Mr. Creveling and stared at him as if he doubted the sanity of his guest.

"You don't say it!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean it, surelef!"

"Why not?"

"Well, stranger, Tenspot Gulch ain't what might be called a place—that is, in the way of bein' a settlement; but whatever it is, folks don't keer to go nigh it. I would ruther go ten miles around it than try to go through it; and I ain't counted a coward."

"Has it such a bad reputation, then?"

"Bad? I should remark! Couldn't be wuss."

"Is it supposed to be the den of a band of desperadoes?"

"Some sort o' hell-hounds. I don't know what they are—never been nigh enough to 'em to find out—but folks do say that lots of men have gone into Tenspot Gulch and not one of 'em has ever come out."

A cloud came over Howard Creveling's fine face. He had the look of a man who has undertaken a dangerous mission and finds unexpected obstacles in his way, but whose resolution is unchanged.

"I have started to find Tenspot Gulch," he said, "and I am going there, if I can get a guide to show the way."

"You are either tol'able solid or powerful cranky," remarked Jim Cain. "Anyhow, you are mighty well set in yer ways. If you must go thar you must, and the best thing to do will be to git hold of the Blizzard."

"Get hold of the Blizzard? What is that?"

"It ain't a *that*—it's a *he*, and he's the only guide you can scare up for that trip. Bill Branch is his name; but he is ginerally known as Bill the Blizzard."

"How did he get such a queer name?"

"Jest by bein' nothin' short of a blizzard—a mixtur' of hurricane, norther and hail-storm. Thar was a lot of roughs who started in to run this town, and they was too much for the decent citizens; but they run afoul of Bill and kicked up a row with him. You ought to have seen him blizzard those chaps! He sailed into 'em like a norther into a drove o' mustangs, shootin' right and left so quick, it would make yer head swim, and in five minutes four of 'em was killed, three more was laid out, and the rest had lit out like a pack o' coyotes. But that's only a sample of his ways. I tell you, stranger, Bill is jest chain lightnin', red hot, and always on tap."

"It is clear that I must get hold of the Blizzard. If you will introduce me to this human tornado, Mr. Cain, I will try to strike a bargain with him."

"All right. But you mustn't call him names. He is white all through—Bill is."

As it happened, Bill the Blizzard was not then in town, and he did not arrive until late in the evening, when Jim Cain brought him up to Mr. Creveling's room at the Rising Sun.

That gentleman was more than surprised at discovering that this "human tornado" was a young fellow, quite boyish-looking in his face, and with only a faint mustache on his lip. His light curling hair and his bright blue eyes added to his boyish appearance, and in his dress there was nothing to show him to be anything but an ordinary young man. He wore a neat and serviceable blue suit, and his black felt hat was not different from those in ordinary wear. The high boots that covered his trowsers-legs were the only part of his apparel suggestive of the plainsman or mountaineer.

But he was tall for his years, sinewy and athletic, and there was something in his face that bespoke him a person to be depended on.

"Are you really Bill the Blizzard?" asked Mr. Creveling, when the landlord had left them to themselves.

"That's the handle the people give me. You may call me Bill if you like. It is shorter."

"Thank you, Bill. But you seem to me to be a mere boy."

"I count as a man though. I am twenty, and have spread myself over a good deal of ground."

"You have lived to some purpose, I suppose. Did Mr. Cain tell you what I wanted to engage you for?"

"He did, and that's what stumps me. He said you wanted to go to Tenspot Gulch."

"That's it. Can you take me there?"

"I am afraid that depends on what you want to go there for, or what you want to do after you get there. I can take you to the Gulch easy enough, and show you the way in; but getting out is another sort of business."

"Is it such a very dangerous place, then?"

"It is a place that folks are fond of keeping away from, and with good cause. If I knew what you were going for—"

"But I don't know, myself."

"Can't you give me a hint?"

"I am looking for a boy, or a youth, or a young man—I don't know which."

"What is his name?"

"I don't know."

"What does he look like?"

"I can't tell."

"How are you to find him, then?"

"I wish I knew."

"Well, Mr. Creveling, I must say that this is the worst wild-goose chase I ever heard of. You are going to look for you don't know who, with no trail or clew, and, of all places in the world, you want to go to Tenspot Gulch to find him."

"That is about the size of it, Bill, as you say out here. I want to go there to find a clew."

"I would advise you to keep away from there, sir, and to go slow."

"But I must go there."

"Very well. We will start in the morning."

Mr. Creveling looked curiously at the young man, who had made this statement with no show of bravado, but in as cool and matter-of-fact a way as if he had accepted a proposition to step across the street. The Englishman began to think that there must be some mistake about the bad reputation of Tenspot Gulch, and that it was not so very dangerous a place, after all.

"What preparations will I need to make?" he asked.

"None that I know of," replied the Blizzard. "It is easy to get a horse, and I suppose you ought to be armed, though I doubt if any amount of weapons will be of any use to you. It will do no harm to make your will."

"I attended to that before I left home. Now, Bill, I would like to take a look about this town after supper, if you will show me the way."

"That is right into my hand, sir, and will please me much better than taking you to Tenspot Gulch."

CHAPTER II.

MARTA.

It was after dark when Bill Branch called to take Mr. Creveling on a cruise about the town of Apacheville.

There were no street lamps in that very new city, but their place was amply supplied by the

flaring and abundant lights of the many saloons and other places of resort, which were wide open all along the main thoroughfare.

In the young guide's dress there was no change, except that he had buckled around his waist a belt that held two revolvers.

"You are looking at my pistols," he said, noticing the Englishman's glance. "It is against the law to carry concealed weapons. Most people pay no attention to the law; but I obey it, and carry mine openly."

"That, at least, gives people to understand what they may expect," remarked Creveling. "Where are we going, Bill?"

"We may as well begin at the top, and look in at the Casino."

"What is that?"

"A liquor saloon and gambling house which is the top notch of that sort of thing. Every man in this region knows Marta's place."

"What is Marta? Not a woman?"

"A girl, and a very handsome one, though she is generally either veiled or masked. When she has her mask on, people keep their eyes peeled, as there is apt to be trouble of some kind for somebody."

The Casino's gaudy front was ablaze with light, and men were coming and going through the wide-open door.

Mr. Creveling followed his guide, and found himself in a large and long room. At the left was a spacious and well equipped bar, and about the counter was a throng of men of various nations and degrees of life, including Chinamen and Indians. Near the door was a keno shrine, surrounded by its devotees. Further back were two faro banks, both in operation, though the hour was too early for a full flow of business. Scattered about were several tables, at one of which some Mexicans were absorbed in monte, and others were devoted to the American games of euchre and poker and seven-up.

Bill Branch led Mr. Creveling past the bar and the games to the far end of the room, where they seated themselves in comparative quiet at a table and called for drinks, which were promptly served.

Just beyond them, in a sort of alcove, a young woman was seated alone behind a small table with a marble top.

It was easy to guess that she was a young woman, though her face was covered with a blood-red mask. This did not conceal her masses of golden hair, her bright eyes, and her lovely mouth and chin. Her hands and wrists, too, were seen to be white and shapely as she sat and shuffled a pack of cards in a dreamy and absent-minded manner.

"That is Marta," whispered Bill to his companion. "She has her mask on. I wonder where the lightning will strike to-night?"

Mr. Creveling gave her but a glance, and it was accompanied by a sigh, as if he thought such a woman strangely out of place in such a den.

Then he lighted one of his own cigars, and looked down the room at the motley groups of players, drinkers and loungers that thronged the Casino. It was such a scene as he had never before witnessed, and he found a peculiar fascination in watching the new and strange characters that the Mushroom City had brought together.

His companion suffered him to get his fill of looking, without interrupting his thoughts by talk, and occasionally stole a furtive glance at Marta, who was still aimlessly and absently shuffling the pack of cards.

At last Mr. Creveling threw away the stump of his cigar.

"Come, Bill," he said, "we have no right to be guests here without paying for our entertainment. I will go and drop a few dollars at one of those faro banks."

"Mr. Howard Creveling had better take care of his money!"

This sentence startled the Englishman. It was spoken in a sweet, clear, and melodious voice, with a slightly mocking tone, and evidently proceeded from the young woman at the table, though she was still absently shuffling her cards as if she had not thought of saying a word.

Mr. Creveling turned as if he had been struck, and stared at her rudely. Then he regained his customary politeness, and slightly raised his hat.

"Beg pardon," he said. "Did you speak to me?"

"I said that Mr. Howard Creveling had better save his money," she quietly replied.

"Why so?"

"Because he never needed it more than he does now."

The Englishman was astonished. It was not surprising that this woman should know his name, as he had passed a day and a night in Apacheville; but there seemed to be a hidden meaning behind her words.

"You are very kind to warn an utter stranger," said he; "but I really cannot imagine why I should be careful of my money."

She laid down the pack of cards, and leaned forward, fixing her bright eyes on his face.

"Because, as I told you, you never needed it more than you do now."

"Will you kindly explain your meaning?"
"Lyster & Co., of London, have failed!" Creveling started again.

"The firm of Creveling & Sanford hold their paper to the amount of twenty thousand pounds."

"It is true," said he.

"That paper has gone to protest, and is not worth a shilling in the pound. That means bankruptcy for the house of Creveling & Sanford."

"No doubt of that, if your information is correct—but it is impossible. Lyster & Co. are solid, and their paper is as good as gold. What reason have you for telling me such a story? Where did you get your information?"

"I have said all I have to say," she replied, as she leaned back in her chair and began to shuffle her cards again.

Mr. Creveling was seriously disturbed by this story, which he had styled an impossible one, and his face showed the agitation of his mind.

"I knew that lightning was going to strike somewhere to-night," said his companion; "but I never thought it would hit you."

"This is incomprehensible," replied Mr. Creveling. "Of course, it is all bosh; but how does that girl happen to know so much about my affairs? Of course, my name could be easily learned at the hotel; but there is no person in this country who could be expected to know of the relations of my firm with Lyster & Co. I doubt if they are known outside of the counting-rooms of the two houses."

"But she told you the truth about that matter," suggested the guide.

"Yes; and if what she told me about the failure of Lyster & Co. is true, I am ruined, for my partner could not realize on our assets in time to avoid a crash. But it is impossible, and I ought not to give it a second thought."

"She must have believed what she told you, sir, or she would not have warned you against losing your money in this place, which she runs."

"I don't care for any such pastime now, Bill. I must confess that I am troubled by this strange revelation, or jugglery, or whatever it is. It is utterly absurd; but I am seriously upset, and I want to go back to the hotel."

At the hotel Howard Creveling was met by a fresh surprise.

A telegram awaited him there, in the form of a cable dispatch from London, which had been forwarded from point to point, and had necessarily experienced considerable delay on the route.

This dispatch was from his partner, and it confirmed the revelation made to him by Marta at the Casino—Lyster & Co. had failed disastrously, and the house of Creveling & Sanford was on the verge of bankruptcy.

This was a terrible blow to Mr. Creveling, though he had been in a measure prepared for it by Marta's "impossible" story. He was anxious to send off a dispatch immediately, but could not do so, as a storm in the mountains had prostrated the wires. He could only endeavor to control his agitation and patiently await further developments.

"We must put off our journey to Tenspot Gulch," he said to his guide. "The business that takes me there is now more important than ever, but I must wait here until I know how matters stand at home."

"Marta told you the truth, then?" asked Bill Branch.

"She did indeed, if this dispatch is genuine. It must have come from London, of course, and I can think of no person who would have an object in hoaxing me or trying to give me trouble. But how did that girl know anything about the matter?"

Bill, the Blizzard, shook his head, and intimated that Marta was a wonderful girl, as good as she was handsome, and as solid as she was smart.

Before noon the next day it was announced that the break in the telegraph line was repaired, and Mr. Creveling hastened to the office to send his dispatch.

"There is something coming for you, sir," said the operator, and in a few minutes he transcribed and handed to that gentleman this message, which caused him to open his eyes wider than ever:

"Many thanks for the line of credit you cabled to us through Drexel, Morgan & Co., of New York. We will have no trouble now, and can wait to realize on our assets."

SANFORD

The Englishman read this dispatch to the guide, who had accompanied him to the telegraph office.

"So you have settled the trouble, and are all right?" said Bill. "Why didn't you tell Marta so when she spoke to you last night?"

"Because I knew nothing about it."

"Knew nothing about it? You are a shade too much for me now, sir."

"Don't you believe me, Bill? Could I have any object in deceiving you? The first information I had of the failure of Lyster & Co. I got from that girl."

"That stamps me. Don't your partner say that you sent him money or something?"

"I sent him nothing of the kind. I have

heard nothing from him, and have sent him no messages. I am entirely ignorant of the 'line of credit' he speaks of in his dispatch."

"Who in thunder has been doing this, then?"

"That is what I would like to know."

CHAPTER III.

A SMALL BLIZZARD.

MR. CREVELING sent a dispatch to his partner, the substance of which was that he did not understand the message he had received from London, that he had caused no line of credit to be cabled, and that he wanted full particulars of the entire business to be sent to him by mail.

Then he proposed to Bill Branch that they should make another visit to the Casino for the purpose of interrogating Marta, and in the evening they set out together.

"I wonder if she will wear her mask to-night," remarked the guide, as they approached the flaming front of the Casino.

"What is there about that mask?" asked the Englishman. "Why does she wear it?"

"I have believed that she wears it because her pretty face is a temptation; but some folks say that whenever she puts it on something out of the way is sure to happen, and I don't know but there is a good deal of truth in that."

"Do you admire her, Bill?"

"Admire her? To tell the truth, sir, I go a notch or two above admiring her."

"Does she know that you like her? What does she think about it?"

"It would be hard to tell what she really thinks about anything. She can keep her own secrets, as well as hoe her own row."

In the Casino they found the usual crowd, with the usual amount of drinking and gambling. It might be supposed that such a crowd in such a place would be distinguished by disorder and rioting; but its very numbers served to keep it reasonably quiet and peaceful. No bully or rough could be sure in such a mixed assemblage of being able to "run the place," and a man who was crazy with liquor might expect to be speedily "fired out" by those who were unwilling to be annoyed by his antics.

Mr. Creveling and his guide pushed through the crowd toward the far end of the room where Marta was usually enthroned.

"She has her mask on again," whispered Bill. "Lightning is going to strike, sure."

There she sat, behind the table, with a blood-red mask over her face, but not with a pack of cards. This time she seemed to be examining a book of accounts, and figuring on a bit of paper.

She nodded as the two men seated themselves near her, and went on with her figuring.

After a while she closed her book, and looked up.

"I suppose you feel as if you have a few dollars to spare this evening," she said, addressing herself to Creveling.

"I believe I am not a beggar yet," he replied, with a quiet smile. "But I am much in the dark concerning myself and my own affairs, and, as you seem to know more about them than I do, I have come to you to ask for some information."

"You are welcome to what I have, such as it is. But would you believe me?"

"Of course I would. You told me the truth last night about the failure of Lyster & Co. and the trouble in my house. I suppose there is no doubt that I was near bankruptcy."

"That need not have worried Mr. Howard Creveling, as he had his Balcombe estate to fall back upon."

The Englishman's astonishment was as great as it had been the previous night. He opened his eyes wide, and nearly dropped his cigar.

"My Balcombe estate!" he exclaimed. "So you know about that, too! But you are vastly mistaken. The Balcombe estate does not belong to me, but to my elder brother, or to his children, if he left any."

"If he left any! There's the rub, I suppose. Now you see, Mr. Creveling, how unreliable my information is, and I think you ought not to ask me for any more."

"But you were exactly right about that other matter, and now I want to know who it was that helped me out of the scrape by cabling money to England."

"Who should it be but yourself?" she asked.

"But it was not I. Somebody has been using my name to send a large amount of money to England. I had nothing to do with it. Was it you?"

Marta laughed merrily.

"I" she exclaimed. "Do I look as if I would be likely to send a large amount of money to England or anywhere else?"

"But you must have done it, or you can tell me who did. You know so much about my affairs, that you must know this."

"You may be sure that I never did it. Whatever else I may know or may not know, I know too much to throw away my money on strangers, if I had any to throw away."

There seemed to be something in the shape of a disturbance down the room, and Bill Branch started to rise.

"Don't go, Bill," requested Marta. "Is that Sile Brunton who is talking so loud down there?"

"Yes."

"I thought so, and I may want you here."

"You had better step aside, Mr. Creveling," said the guide. "Marta has not got her mask on for nothing to-night, and I am afraid there is going to be trouble."

But the Englishman did not move.

What was going on down the room could be partly guessed at from the loud words of Sile Brunton, a large man with a red face and a coarse voice. He was the center of a group who seemed to be trying to dissuade him from something he proposed to do.

"Of course I will," said Brunton. "Any more money up? Fifty dollars more that I do it."

"Better not, Sile. She will shoot."

"Shoot nothin'! Do you think I was born in the woods to be scared by a canary bird. When Sile Brunton says he will do a thing, it will be done. Come and see."

He swaggered toward the upper end of the room, closely followed by his group of friends, until he stood before Marta, who was again absorbed in her book, and paid no attention to him.

His coarse voice sounded particularly un-

pleasant as he spoke.

"Say, missy, I want a kiss."

Marta did not look up.

"I say, Marta, I want a kiss."

"Go and get one, then," she quietly replied.

"I want one from you."

"Five and two are seven—I don't keep that kind of goods in stock—and nine are sixteen; six, and one to carry."

"I mean to have a kiss—right now, too."

Take that red thing off your face, or I'll pull it off."

Marta did not look up.

Bill Branch sat motionless, with his eyes fixed on the girl, as if he expected some sort of a signal from her; but she made no sign.

Brunton looked around, and saw that his friends, who had been following him at a little distance, were coming up more rapidly.

The big brute reached out his right arm toward Marta's mask, but the Englishman's hand dropped on his coat-collar, and he was jerked back and thrown sprawling upon the floor.

As he rose to his feet, attempting to draw a pistol, Creveling knocked him down.

Marta kept at her figuring without seeming to take any notice of the fracas.

Brunton's followers, seeing his fall, rushed forward to take vengeance on the Englishman, and pistols were drawn and knives flashed.

But Bill Branch stood before them with a cocked revolver in each hand.

Looking at him then no one could wonder that he had got the name of the Blizzard.

He was fairly transformed. He seemed to have suddenly grown taller, and his face shone with excitement, and his eyes blazed. He stood like a rock, and it needed but a word from him to stop the rush.

"Halt there!" shouted the Blizzard. "Fall back, you hell-hounds, or the price of coffins will rise in Apacheville. You know me! The first man who pulls will be a case for the coroner. Clear out, I say! That man has got no more than his due, and you had better not try to back him up."

The guide's resolute tone and air, backed by his two revolvers, were sufficient for the purpose. Brunton's followers only wanted an excuse to back out of a bad business, and they did so as gracefully as they could.

"We wasn't backin' him," declared one.

"He ain't no pard of ours," added another.

But the Blizzard watched them until every weapon was restored to its place, and until the men had sidled off and mingled with the crowd at the other end of the room.

Sile Brunton was on the floor looking helplessly into the muzzle of a pistol held by Howard Creveling.

"Let him up," said the guide, and the brute slowly rose to his feet.

Bill advised him to "slide out," and to refrain from attempting to play such a game again.

"Wait a moment," interposed Marta. "Sile Brunton, I will let you off this time; but I give you fair warning that, if you ever come within ten feet of me again I will kill you as I would a mad dog."

The man scowled, and walked away without a word.

Marta rose and came to Creveling with a smile under her mask.

"It was none of your mix, stranger," she said; "but you meant well, and I am sure that you are a gentleman, one of the right sort. Take this to help you remember me."

She took a ring from her hand and slipped it on his little finger.

"I am not likely to forget you," he replied, gallantly.

"I hope you will remember what is good in me, if you find anything. Now, you may as well leave this place. You have something better to do than fooling around those faro banks."

Bill, the Blizzard.

"Have you nothing to say to me, Marta?" asked the guide, looking at her wistfully.

"You are a good fellow, Bill, and you can be depended upon. You don't want me to pay you?"

"Yes—with a kind word."

"Take good care of yourself, then, for my sake, as well as for your own."

Mr. Creveling and Bill Branch returned to the Rising Sun, and the Englishman did not speak until they reached his room. Then he offered his companion his hand.

"The girl was right," he said. "You can be depended on. In the morning, if you are willing, we will set out for Tenspot Gulch."

"Very well, sir."

CHAPTER IV.

WANTING TO GET EVEN.

ABOUT two weeks before the arrival of Howard Creveling at Apacheville, and some fifty miles to the northward of that town, a horseman was riding alone along a blind trail that led through a broken and rocky region.

The horseman was young, tall and handsome, and only a slight mustache showed on his upper lip. In short, he was no other than Bill Branch, commonly known as Bill the Blizzard.

He was well mounted, and carried, besides his revolvers and a heavy cartridge-belt, a breech-loading rifle.

Although he was traveling in a desolate and uninhabited country, he kept a sharp lookout in all directions, and scarcely a leaf waved or a bush stirred that he did not see or hear it.

"It can't be far from here," he said to himself. "It is a good camping-place, and I hope I will find it before night sets in."

But night had fairly settled down upon the earth when he halted near the entrance to a dark ravine that sloped downward and westward, flanked on both sides by high hills.

"This must be the place," he said. "Yes, I am sure it is. Yonder is the big flat rock, and here is the blasted tree. I will be glad enough to rest, and to drink some of the cool water of that spring."

He rode on, down into the growing darkness that was deepened by the lofty hills and the tall timber; but he had gone only a short distance into the ravine when he saw a faint light ahead, a little to the right of the trail he was following.

"Somebody is there ahead of me," he muttered, with a shade of anger in his tone. "Who can it be? I must know what kind of a party it is, before I think of camping there."

He turned aside into the timber, hitched his horse, and stealthily made his way on foot toward the light.

Although he wore heavy boots, he could scarcely have moved more softly if he had been shod with moccasins. Hardly a twig cracked, and hardly a leaf rustled under his feet.

Silent as a shadow he stole toward the light, and finally ensconced himself behind a rock, from which position he could look down into a little hollow, where there was plenty of grass under the tall trees, and where a little brook was babbling from a spring that was almost underneath him.

A fire of dry sticks was burning in the hollow, and two men sat by it, their horses being tethered near them.

One of these men was swarthy and dark as an Indian, with straight black hair and a smooth face. The other was heavily built, with light hair and abundant beard.

Their faces were strange to Bill Branch; but he was sure that he would know them if he should see them again.

They were eating their supper when the Blizzard first looked at them; but it was soon finished, and they lighted their pipes and began to smoke.

Occasionally they spoke; but their words were few and uttered in a low tone, and there was nothing in what they said, or in their appearance or surroundings, to enable the watcher to guess their quality or purposes. They had good horses, and were well armed, but were shabbily dressed, and it was quite likely that the horses were stolen property.

The Blizzard had nearly made up his mind to join them, when his attention was arrested by the approaching footfalls of a horse, and he waited.

The two men in the hollow also heard the sounds, and they started up and handled their weapons.

"Who goes there?" challenged one, as a horseman came slowly through the timber, evidently attracted by the light.

"White, and a friend," briefly replied the new-comer.

As the firelight shone on him, it revealed a tall man, whose slouched hat did not conceal a broad red scar that stretched from his forehead down his cheek.

"Sam Byers!" muttered the Blizzard. "That is no place for me, and it is lucky I kept out."

The horseman was as quickly recognized by the two men in the hollow.

"Sam Byers!" exclaimed the dark man. "Why, Sam, who would ever have thought of meeting you here?"

"Where on earth did you come from, Dick Clements?" replied the horseman. "What! that ain't Bob Risley with you? Durn my skin if it ain't, though. Well, I've struck it rich, tonight, and no mistake."

"Light down, Sam, and take a snack with us," invited Clements.

"That hits me in the right place, pard, as I'm tired and hungry, and I hope you've got a drop of suthin' stronger'n water."

Byers dismounted, hitched his horse, and fraternized with the two campers, each of whom offered him a bottle. It was plain that the three were old friends, and that the meeting was really a pleasure to all.

The watcher behind the rock, though he was himself tired and hungry, did not desert his post, but remained to look and listen.

"It may be worth while to find out who they are and what they are after," he thought.

Sam Byers ate ravenously, and had little to say until he had finished his supper. Then he lighted a pipe, and the tongues of the three men wagged more freely.

"Where have you come from, Sam, and where are you going to?" asked Clements.

"I've been up the country a bit, and am going down to Apacheville."

"That's where we are bound for."

"So we will be together again at last. Where have you been keeping yourselves this ever so long?"

"We were in Missouri quite a while. Then we worked down into Texas, and then up the Red River till we struck the mountains."

"Those are good bosses you've got there? Where did they come from?"

"We have been changing off now and then. We picked those up at a stock farm."

"How are you off for lucre?"

"That's where the shoe pinches, Sam. We are nigh cleaned out, and money is what we are after."

"Well, boys, there's more'n one way to get hold of money, and the chaps who go for it the rough way are gittin' mighty thick about here."

"But we've got a sure thing," said Risley. "We know just what we're goin' arter."

"I'd like to know what it is."

"Shall I tell him, Dick?"

"Yes—no harm."

"The fact is, Sam Byers, that we're arter a man, and we mean to git even with him. Dick and me struck a pard up in Missouri. We didn't know much about him; but he seemed to be squar' and good grit, and we took a notion to him. He called himself Billy Button, though I don't reckon that was his real name, and don't care if it wasn't. He was right handy, and Dick and me did a good lot of business along with him. Well, one day we went through a train on the Iron Mountain road, and you may bet we struck it rich. We got more'n seven thousand dollars off'n that train; but then the trouble began."

"That's where our man comes in," remarked Clements.

"That's where he slides out, too. You see, Sam, Dick and me was 'most too well known in those parts, and we allowed we'd best make Billy Button our cashier. So we handed all the money over to him, and Dick and me scattered. He promised to meet us at a little place near the Arkansas line, and we worked down thar arter a bit; but nothin' did we see of Billy Button. We hung around thar a week or so, and axed questions keerfully, but never hide or hair did we see of Billy Button. Then we knew that he had lit out with the funds, like a reg'lar bank cashier, and we cussed him a few. This was about three months ago, and ever sence Dick and me has been hankerin' for a chance to git even with Billy Button. We struck his trail at last down on Red River and followed it up until we heard that he had gone on to Apacheville; and that's the burg we're bound for at this present."

"I don't wonder, boys, that you are keen to follow that trail," said Sam Byers, "and I would be glad to give you a lift. What sort of a man to look at was your Billy Button?"

"About five feet ten inches high," replied Clements. "Square built and heavy set; brown hair and plenty of it, with a full beard. His face was about the reddest I ever saw on a human."

"There's plenty men of that sort, Dick, and I know of one who comes into Apacheville now and then who would nigh fill the bill. His name ain't Billy Button, though, but Sile Brunton, and he don't wear a beard, and his hair is short; but for hight and build and red face he is about the figure."

"If we lay eyes on our man we will be sure to know him," Clements declared.

"Well, boys, I hope you will find him. Anyhow, I am glad that you are going on to Apacheville. And now I am going to take a snooze, as I am nigh tuckered out."

The watcher behind the rock had heard all he wanted to know. He silently made his way back to the place where he had left his horse, ate a cold lunch, wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down on the ground to sleep.

CHAPTER V.

TWO STORIES.

WESTWARD rode Howard Creveling and his guide, in search of the mysterious locality known as Tenspot Gulch.

The Englishman was mounted on a powerful bay horse, which he had purchased for the trip, and Bill Branch was carried by a tough broncho, which he had caught and broken and trained to suit himself.

Each was well armed, and in capacious saddle bags they carried a good supply of provisions.

"Queer name, is Tenspot Gulch," remarked Mr. Creveling, as they pursued their journey.

"I wish that was the only queer thing about it," replied Bill.

"Do you know how it got that name?"

"Well, sir, there is a bit of a story about it, and I suppose the story is true. It is said that two travelers, partners, had camped in the Gulch one night, about the time the gold finds began to draw people into this country."

"They were hard up for something to do, and naturally took to playing cards. It is not known what other games they tried; but it is certain that they played a long string of seven-up, as they left there two notched sticks that they had used for counting."

"They were pretty even players, and neither dared to cheat, and now the luck would run one way, and then another. So, after a long pull, they found themselves where they started, each with about the same pile he had at the beginning."

"Tired of that kind of foolishness, they at last agreed to shuffle the deck in plain sight, and to turn up one after the other, and the first man to turn up the tenspot of diamonds should have both piles."

"A storm was coming on when they made this agreement, dark clouds were rolling up from the southward, and the thunder was beginning to growl."

"So they turned up, one after the other, fair and open, until, when they had nearly reached the bottom of the pack, one of them showed the tenspot of diamonds.

"By this time the storm had burst, and the thunder and lightning were rattling and shooting all about the Gulch."

"As soon as the ten of diamonds was turned, the man who showed it was shot dead by the other."

"Hardly was the shot fired, when the man who fired it was struck dead by a bolt of lightning."

"The next morning a train of gold hunters came through the Gulch, and they found the two dead men there."

"That is a strange story," said Mr. Creveling; "but the strangest part of it is that you should know so much about it, when neither of the men was left to tell it."

"I only tell what I have heard, sir, and it is easy enough to see how it all happened. As I told you, the counters showed that they had been playing a long string of seven-up, and there were the cards, laid face up in two piles near the rest of the deck. One of the men had the ten of diamonds in his fingers and a pistol bullet in his head. The other had a pistol in his hand with one chamber empty, and there was no doubt that he had been struck by lightning. As the money lay before them, it was plain that they had been knocked down before either could grab the stakes."

"Just so, and the imagination can easily fill in the details. I am sorry that Tenspot Gulch has such a bad reputation. But I understand, Bill, that you have been in there."

"Yes, sir; I have been through the Gulch twice, and nobody has molested me, and I saw nothing out of the way. But I must be luckier than most folks, as it is a common saying that no man who goes in there is likely to come out."

"What is the matter with the place, then?"

"I suppose, sir, it has become a sort of headquarters for cowboys, cattle-thieves, road-agents and the like, who are having things pretty much their own way in these parts nowadays."

Mr. Creveling's face darkened. It was clear that his mind was not at all at ease concerning his mission to Tenspot Gulch.

"But you are going to guide me to that dangerous place, Bill?" he queried.

"Yes, sir. You pay well, and I am glad of a chance to earn your money. I am to guide you there, as you say, and I am to take you into the Gulch; but I don't guarantee to bring you out. If I knew what you are after, I might make a better guess at the chances."

The Englishman looked at his companion closely and was silent for a while.

"Well, Bill," he then said, "I am sure that you can be depended on. I don't need Marta's word for that. I will tell you all I know, though I am afraid it will not make the matter much clearer."

"You heard Marta say that I would have my Balcombe estate to fall back upon. Though she was mistaken on that point, I wondered how she could know anything about it."

"Balcombe is a fine estate in England that belongs in our family. My elder brother,

Arthur Creveling, quarreled with his father some twenty years or more ago, and left his home. I chose to go into business, and in the course of time I have become wealthy. We heard nothing from Arthur for a long time, beyond learning that he had gone to America. Then I received a letter from him, dated at some out-of-the-way place in the West, saying that he had married, that he would never return to England, and that he relinquished his claims on Balcombe. That amounted to nothing under our law, as the estate is what we call entailed.

"I answered his letter, begging him to come home, but heard nothing more from him."

"After father's death I made many efforts to find Arthur, and spent considerable money in the search, but could learn nothing more of him, or of a young fellow named John Wilson, a sort of body servant of Arthur's, who left England with him. Both seemed to have disappeared, to have vanished utterly."

"Some two months ago I received a letter from John Wilson, informing me of the death of my brother. The letter was dated and post-marked Apacheville. 'If you want to find the son of Arthur Creveling and the heir of Balcombe,' said Wilson, 'come to Tenspot Gulch, near Apacheville.'

"I answered the letter, saying that I would come on as soon as I could arrange my affairs so as to give me a leave of absence, and here I am on my way to Tenspot Gulch."

"If my brother's son is living, I want to put him in possession of his property. If not, I must know it and prove it, so that the Balcombe estate may have an owner, and it is a fine property that is lying idle over there."

"That puts a different face on the matter," remarked the guide, "and I doubt if there is any real danger ahead for you. Your man Wilson may not be one of the best men in the world. The odds are pretty heavy against his moral character when he hails from Tenspot Gulch. But it is not likely that he means you any harm, or that he would have brought you all that distance for nothing. It is likely that he don't want to show up among sheriffs and that sort; but I suppose he will keep you safe where he has invited you to meet him. I am afraid, though, that the young Creveling may prove a rough kind of customer."

"I must do my best to find him, Bill," said Mr. Creveling, "and must make the best I can of him when I get him. I am a childless widower, and want something of my own kin to cling to."

Night had set in when the travelers reached a camping-place, which they found in a thick clump of timber.

Beyond them the trail narrowed, until it seemed to be completely closed off by a range of rugged hills. The night was cloudy and very dark.

They secured their horses, built a little fire, and had a comfortable supper and smoke. Then they prepared for the night.

Bill Branch requested his companion to lie down and sleep, as he wished to take the first watch, and the Englishman coiled up in a blanket.

But he was restless, and at midnight he arose, and insisted upon taking his turn at keeping guard.

"Very well," said Bill, "I suppose we are safe enough, but we are in sight of the Gulch. I thought it best to camp here to-night, and go in there early in the morning. Keep your eyes open, Mr. Creveling, and don't let me sleep more than three hours at the most."

The guide wrapped himself in his blanket, and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

He slept so soundly that he did not awake until near daybreak. In fact, the sky had cleared, and the stars were beginning to grow pale.

He started up, and looked about, amazed and bewildered.

Why had he not waked sooner? Why had he been permitted to sleep so long?

He saw nothing of the Englishman, and called him, but got no answer.

He called him again and again, but not the faintest sound gave an indication of his presence.

The two horses were standing there, but Mr. Creveling had vanished.

Bill the Blizzard was then thoroughly alarmed, but his astonishment was greater than his alarm. He could only wait for daylight, as it was impossible to make any examination of the ground at that hour, and he devoted his spare time to fortifying himself with a breakfast.

As soon as there was light enough, he searched the clump of timber, not expecting to see any signs of a scuffle, but hoping to follow the trail of his companion, who might have carelessly wandered away and got lost.

His astonishment was increased when he discovered, at only a little distance from his camp fire, a number of footprints, and their character and arrangement showed that there had been some kind of a collision there.

Examining the signs more closely, he distinguished the marks of the Englishman's boots and the tracks of three other men.

The tracks were quite plentiful at one spot,

and from there they made a trail, leading in the direction of Tenspot Gulch.

He easily followed the trail until it entered a little brook or "spring branch" that flowed from the Gulch.

It was clear that Mr. Creveling had not wandered off, and had not been spirited away, but had been captured and carried off bodily, probably by men who had watched his approach, and had lain in wait for him.

But how could such a capture have been effected within a few yards of the spot where his guide slept?

To the Blizzard it seemed impossible that it could have been done without awaking him; and yet, it had been done.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN CRAFTON'S SEER.

ALTHOUGH Marta spent the greater part of her nights at the Casino, she did not sleep there.

She was the main attraction of the place, and it was generally believed that she was the proprietor of the building and the bar; but she did not own the entire "outfit," the gaming "privileges" of the Casino being leased to other parties, and some of these men, with her barkeepers, slept in the building, and guarded and cared for it.

Where, then, was the home of this night bird, who was such a magnet and such a mystery to the denizens of Apacheville, as well as to strangers in that rampant young city?

Let us follow her as she leaves the Casino at one of the small hours of the morning, when the last bummer has been persuaded or forced to leave those fascinating premises, and the barkeepers are preparing to close the place for a few hours.

She is alone, as she seldom allows any person to accompany her on that pilgrimage. She does not wear her mask, but is closely veiled, and a light cloak protects her from the cool night air. Under her cloak, and handy for an emergency, is a revolver of light make but the most approved pattern, and she is skilled in its use.

Consequently she has no more fear than a man might have, although she is in herself so strong a temptation to the brutal and the lawless.

Under the starlight she sallies forth, and noiselessly as a spirit she flits by the closed doors of the main street of Apacheville, which looks rough and shabby when the glare of its many lamps are gone.

Occasionally she hears a distant tread on a stony way, or the hic-cuppy song of some belated reveler; but she pays no attention to these noises of the late night.

She turns to the right from the main street, and ascends a rough and rocky track, which has the name but not the nature of a street, and which leads direct to the rear hills.

A few houses are scattered along this way; but they are mostly the rudest of shanties and huts, and all are dark and silent.

She stops at the last house of the straggling collection, which stands alone, at some distance from any other, close against the rocky face of the mountain.

You might suppose this house to be merely a rough barred shanty of the commonest description, as it certainly has that appearance; but, if the single barred window and the heavy closed door were open, you could not fail to see that the walls are of unusual thickness.

It is, indeed, a solid stone building, faced with rough boarding, shanty fashion, to give an appearance of poverty, or to gratify some whim of its owner's.

Marta took a key from her pocket, and, after glancing around instinctively, opened the door and went in, closing it carefully behind her.

She found herself in a square room, well furnished, with appliances of luxury as well as of comfort, and with a heavy safe let into the solid rock in the side that faced the mountain.

A lamp was burning on the table, and near the table, in a large easy-chair, sat an old man.

He was not an ill-looking old man, though there was an expression of craftiness in the lines of his face and in his eyes that were too close together, such as was not altogether pleasant.

A little stoop-shouldered he was with iron-gray hair, and considerably wrinkled; but he seemed to be a tolerably hale and vigorous old man for all that, and his serviceable clothing and boots that half-covered his legs, spoke of an active outdoor life.

It should be noted that his face was smoothly shaven, and his gray hair was cut short.

"Up yet, dad, or up already?" asked Marta, as she laid off her hat and cloak.

"It is up yet, Marta," replied the old man, who was known to the business men of Apacheville as John Crafton, a capitalist of unknown but undoubted wealth. "I was restless, and have only been dozing in this chair. How is business?"

"Good as ever. The Englishman came to the Casino last night, and he said—"

"Yes; I know what he said. He said that he was all right in money matters, and he wanted to know how you got your information."

"That's it. How did you know that he was all right?"

"Why, Marta, a man who has money and is

willing to spend it can sometimes get hold of other people's dispatches, and it pays to know about men."

"Was that the way of it? I hope no harm will come to the Englishman, as he is a nice man, and I like him. That big brute, Sile Brunton, has been bothering me again. He made a bet that he would kiss me right there in the Casino, and he tried to do it."

"But he lost his bet?"

"Of course he did. You ought to have seen the Englishman floor him."

"Did Brunton have no backers?"

"Yes," replied Marta with a smile, "but Bill the Blizzard was there."

"Ah! He is a useful fellow to have at hand in time of danger, and no doubt he was glad to come to your rescue."

"Dad, I am getting tired of the Casino."

John Crafton frowned.

"Why do you keep on calling me dad?" he asked, a little fretfully. "You know that you are not my daughter, but the child of a dead friend of mine, whom I took care of as a matter of duty."

"I like to call you dad, anyhow, and I see no harm in that."

"I have done well by you, Marta. I have given you the kind of education that is worth something to you in this country, and I have set you up in the Casino. It is true that you have to account to me for half the profits; but there is plenty of money for you in the place."

"It is not a bit of a lovely life to lead, though," said Marta.

"Well, you can change it when you want to, as you are your own mistress; but I would advise you not to be in a hurry to get rid of that little gold mine. Now, Marta, as I am kind to you, I want you to be useful to me, and show me something."

The girl trembled and turned pale, and put out both her hands, as if to shut out a vision she dreaded.

"Not that, dad!" she pleaded. "Please don't! It worries me, and makes me weak and nervous. It is worse than the Casino."

"Don't be silly, Marta. It is only for a few minutes. Look at me, my child."

As she raised her eyes, with a scared and troubled look, he made a few passes, and she sunk back in her chair apparently lifeless, staring with glassy eyes.

"Where are you now?" asked John Crafton.

"In front of a tall and dark building, and there is a dingy sign that reads 'Creveling & Sanford'."

"Good. Step in, and tell me what you see there."

"I see a large room," said Marta, in a dreamy and monotonous tone. "There is a long counter, closed in with glass and wire. Many clerks are there, and many people are coming in and going out. Some are taking up money, and some are laying money down. There is a great deal of money there."

"That is well. Not much of a crash there. Enough of London, now. Come back to America, and follow the trail to Tenspot Gulch. Ah! you see something. What is it, then?"

"I see a dead fire in a bunch of trees, and Bill Branch is lying near it. Is he dead? No, he is asleep. There is another man there. Yes, it is the Englishman. He is walking away, with his hands behind his back and his head down. What is he thinking of?"

Suddenly the girl stopped speaking and shivered as if with cold, while her eyes rolled, and the muscles of her face contracted. Then she spoke quickly, and her hands rose and fell rapidly.

"See! there are three men crouching there! They spring upon him. They seize him, and throw something over his head. He struggles, but he cannot escape. Oh, Bill! dear Bill! why do you not wake?"

John Crafton smiled, rubbed his hands, and looked at her intently.

"What more, Marta?" he asked. "Do you see nothing more?"

"Yes; they have tied his hands, and they are hurrying him away. Now they go faster, and soon they will be out of sight. I must go back to Bill. There he is, still sleeping by the side of the dead fire. Oh, Bill! dear Bill! why did you not wake?"

The old man leaned forward, and touched the girl on her cheek. She shuddered, opened her eyes, and stared about wildly.

"Where have I been?" she asked. "What have I seen? What have I said?"

"Do you really love Bill Branch, Marta?"

asked the old man.

"Have I said so?"

"Of course I knew that before, my child."

"Have I seen him? Is he in danger?"

"In no more danger than you are in at this moment. But you saw him, and you showed a strong affection for him."

"If I do love him, or if I do not, what of it?"

"It would be no wonder, my child. He is a fine fellow—a good fellow."

"Too good for me, I am afraid—at least, as long as I stick to that Casino."

"Don't worry about that, Marta. I am greatly obliged to you for what you have shown me,

and I will not trouble you in this way again for a long time—perhaps never!"

"I hope so," she replied.

"I hope so, too. You had better take a sup of my cordial, and go to bed."

He filled a wine glass with a dark-colored liquid from a bottle in a cupboard, and handed it to her.

"Drink this," said he, "and you will be all right when you wake. You will not find me here then. I am going away, and may be gone for several days."

Marta drained the glass, and wearily ascended the stairs to her room.

CHAPTER VII.

TENSPOT GULCH.

MARTA had but faintly described the scene in the clump of timber before Bill Branch awoke, and the outlines of her sketch must be filled in.

Howard Creveling felt no inclination to sleep after his guide had lain down, and he walked to and fro under the trees, absorbed in meditation.

His meditations were various, but mainly filled with wonder and conjecture.

How had that girl at the Casino been able to inform him of his firm's trouble in London, and who had sent the money that had probably averted a disaster?

Why was it that John Wilson had appointed for him such a place of meeting as Tenspot Gulch, and what sort of a person would the heir of Balcombe prove to be?

The more he thought of these things, the more he was puzzled.

He was restless, and his guide was sleeping well. Why should he not let the Blizzard enjoy his rest, and continue his watch and his meditation?

But there was less of the watch than there was of the meditation. That is to say, the meditation was indulged in to the exclusion of the idea of watchfulness.

Mr. Creveling walked, after his manner at home, with his hands behind his back and his head bowed down, until he lost all thought of the purpose for which he was supposed to be keeping awake.

In his abstraction he walked away from the remains of the fire, and strayed further into the clump of timber until he reached its western edge.

Then he raised his eyes, and looked about him, wondering where he was. The darkness was very dense, and he had no idea of the direction he must take to find his sleeping guide.

He was about to call the Blizzard, when three men suddenly sprung upon him from behind the trees.

A blanket was thrown over his head, stifling any attempt at an outcry, and his hands were tied behind his back before he could think of using them.

Then he was seized by the arm and hurried away toward Tenspot Gulch, though he could not know what course he was taking. His abduction had been accomplished so silently and suddenly that he could not realize what had happened, until he found himself trotting over rough ground, and occasionally heard a hoarse but low voice, and felt the gentle prick of a knife urging him to greater speed.

There had been more than half an hour of this traveling, when his conductors slackened their pace, and removed the blanket from his head, allowing him to breathe more freely.

He could also see, as well as the darkness would permit, and perceived that he was in a narrow pass, with lofty cliffs on each side, which increased the blackness of the night.

He judged that this must be Tenspot Gulch.

He could also see that his captors were three large and powerful men, well provided with pistols and cartridge belts. Each was heavily bearded and coarsely dressed.

"We are safe now," said one of them. "That job was well done, Ben. The Blizzard never thought of wakin'."

"Lucky for us," said another. "If he had roused up, there'd ha' been trouble."

"We would have been forced to mount him."

"Yes, and somebody would ha' got hurt. I'm glad we didn't have to tackle the young cuss."

Mr. Creveling thought he would try to get some information from them, and he had seen enough of the men of that region to know that it would be well to address them as "gentlemen."

"Gentlemen," he said, "I would like to know why you have captured me, and what you are going to do with me."

"You're all right, guv'nor," replied the man who had been addressed as Ben. "Nobody wants to hurt you. Jest make yerself easy."

"If you mean me no harm, why should you pick me up and carry me off in that style?"

"Only out o' friendship, guv'nor. You're goin' jest whar you want to go to; but the man you're goin' to see don't keer to have no outside parties, like Bill Branch, mixed up with his affairs. Don't you see?"

The Englishman did not see very clearly; but he perceived that it would be useless to argue the matter or make any further inquiry.

"Beg pardon," said Ben, when they had gone a little further. "We'll have to blindfold you for a bit."

A handkerchief was tied over the captive's eyes, although it was still so dark that he could hardly see three feet from his face, and he was led across the Gulch.

Then he heard the noise of running water, and soon it became evident to him that his conductors were leading him up a steep ascent, where he still heard the noise of running water. They were obliged to move carefully and slowly, as the route was a very difficult one, and it seemed to him that they were a long time in accomplishing a comparatively short distance.

At last the bandage was removed from his eyes, and he beheld a strange scene, which was partially illuminated by a torch held by one of his captors.

Before him was a lake, as smooth and as quiet as glass, and overhung by thick darkness. It was nearly circular, and he judged it to be about ten rods in diameter. It was walled in, and covered with rock. In fact, it occupied the entire extent of a large and apparently lofty cavern.

The only outlet was a small stream that ran through a fissure down into the darkness, and it was doubtless the course of that stream which Mr. Creveling and his conductors had followed to the lake.

Near the outlet was a flat-bottomed boat, and on the other side of the lake a torch threw a lurid light upon the dark water.

"Now, guv'nor," said Ben, "if you'll git into the boat we'll have you over thar in a jiffy."

The Englishman stepped in, followed by his conductors, one of whom paddled the boat across the lake.

On the way his hands were untied. It was clear that his captors believed him to be so completely in their power that no further precautions were required.

He stepped out upon a small platform of rock, which showed the handiwork of man, and passed into a smaller cavern with which unusual pains had been taken to make it a comfortable habitation.

There was no water there, and a bright fire made it dry and cheerful. There were couches about this apartment, well supplied with blankets and skins, and several articles of furniture of quite a decent appearance.

The only visible occupant of this cavern was an oldish-looking man, with reddish-brown hair and beard, who was seated near the fire, and who turned and arose as the four men entered.

"This is Mr. Creveling, I suppose?" said he. "I am very glad to see you at last, sir."

"My name is Creveling," replied that gentleman; "but I must say that I do not know who you are."

"Why, I am John Wilson, who left England as your brother's valet, who afterward became his companion, and who was his trusted friend up to the time of his death."

"I would never have thought it, and I now find it difficult to believe what you tell me. As I remember John Wilson, he was a man with decidedly black hair, and yours is anything but black."

"Have the kindness to take a seat, sir. That and other matters need to be explained. The truth is, Mr. Creveling, that this is not my own hair. Disguises are sometimes necessary, and this is one of mine. I must confess—what you may already have suspected—that I have been living in this country to a certain extent outside of the law. The first principle of people here is to get rich. Perhaps it might be better to get rich honestly; but I doubt if honesty would make a rich man any more respected. I have got rich. Some people take the property of others legally, and others take it illegally."

"In short," interrupted Mr. Creveling, "you are a sort of an outlaw."

"Just so. You will wonder at that, I suppose?"

"No. I believe I have passed the point of wondering at anything I see or hear in this strange country."

"But you must have wondered at my asking you to meet me in such an out-of-the-way place as Tenspot Gulch, and that is now explained. You will also understand why I took such an unceremonious way to bring you here. Your guide is a fine young fellow, but I would be loth to let him into the secret of this haunt. If you doubt that I am John Wilson—"

Mr. Creveling said that he was satisfied on that point.

"Very well, then. I will now show you what I regard as the last will and testament of my departed master and friend, your brother Arthur."

Wilson took from his breast-pocket a folded paper, time-worn and with faded writing, and handed it to Mr. Creveling. It contained, among other matter, this instruction:

"Above all things, my dear Wilson, I wish you to keep my child here until he is eighteen, and in the mean time hold no communication with my people over the water. When he reaches that age, I wish you to take him to England, or see that he goes there, to claim his inheritance."

Howard Creveling read the paper carefully. "I have no doubt," he said, "that this is my brother's handwriting, although it differs from the hand he wrote before he left England. I believe you to be John Wilson, my brother's former valet, who wrote to me requesting me to come to Tenspot Gulch to find the heir of Balcombe. I am here, and now I want to see my brother's son."

"I will bring him to you," said John Wilson. "Please excuse me for a moment."

"You need no excuse."

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. CREVELING'S CAPTIVITY.

LEAVING his compulsory guest seated, the host of this strange establishment went back into another part of the cavern, and soon reappeared, followed by a young man.

It was not an extraordinary young man. Quite a commonplace and everyday youth of eighteen or thereabout, with black hair and eyes. He was well dressed, and gentlemanly in his appearance; but there was nothing handsome or distinguished looking in his face or form.

Mr. Creveling opened his eyes wide as this young man came in.

"Arthur," said the old man, "this gentleman is your uncle from England, Mr. Howard Creveling."

The young fellow advanced and held out his hand.

"I am very glad to see you uncle Howard," said he, "and I am thankful to you for having come so far to find me and take me home."

"I am quite surprised," said the Englishman. "Sit down, young gentleman. I say, Wilson, that I am quite surprised. I would never have taken this lad to be a Creveling. He has not a single feature of the family."

"That is true enough," replied the old man, and I have often made the same remark. He is exactly like his mother. Your brother married a Mexican girl, and I suppose there must have been a bit of Indian in her blood. Arthur is the very image of his mother."

"It is strange. In such an old and established stock as the Crevelings some family feature has always been sure to show itself, through all alliances. I have never known it to fail. But this is a queer country, and I expect to be surprised at every step. Of course you are aware, Wilson, that some sort of identification will be necessary for the authorities in England, before the boy can be put in possession of his property."

"Yes, sir, and I will do the best that can be done in that line. Here is his father's marriage certificate."

Mr. Creveling carefully perused the paper that was handed him. It certified that a marriage had been solemnized by Antonio Xiques, a Catholic priest at Santa Fe, New Mexico, between Arthur Creveling and Felipa Xavarra.

"That seems to be the correct thing," said the Englishman. "Now, Wilson, have you a certificate of birth or of baptism?"

"No, sir. That sort of thing is not required in this country, and is not customary here. Besides, little Arthur was born in the mountains, out of the reach of civilized society, and I doubt if he was ever baptized. Even if I had such a certificate, Mr. Creveling, of what use would it be? The boy would still have to be identified."

"True enough. That will be necessary. I must confess that if he were such a young fellow as Bill Branch, the guide who came with me from Apacheville, I would take to him more readily. That young man has more of the Creveling look than this lad."

John Wilson turned away his face to conceal the malignant look that it displayed. He saw that Howard Creveling was anything but favorably impressed by his nephew, and was disposed to make trouble.

"As I have your brother's letter, Mr. Creveling," he said, "in which he puts his son in my charge, and tells me what I am to do with him, I think I am entitled to some consideration. The only identification needed is such as will satisfy you, and you have the testimony of John Wilson, who has known the boy since he was an infant."

"Will you go to England, then, and identify him?"

"Not a bit of it. You will certify that he is Arthur Creveling, and that will be sufficient to enable him to go to England and claim his rights, while you stay here and keep me company for a while."

Mr. Creveling jumped up, highly indignant.

"Do you have the assurance to propose," he asked, "that I shall send that lad to England, certified as you say, and remain here until he gets himself installed?"

"That is just what I do propose."

"Then you may as well understand, once for all, that I shall do nothing of the kind."

"You are in my power, Mr. Creveling, and if you won't be reasonable you must stay here, whether or no, until you consent to look at things in the right light."

"So this was all cut and dried, as the Yankees say," thought the Englishman.

John Wilson crossed the lake at night, and went down into the gulch, where he mounted a horse and rode away, accompanied by one of the men who had brought Mr. Creveling to the cavern.

He had something special to say to this man.

"Do you know Bill Branch, Ben?" he asked—"the chap who is called the Blizzard?"

"Should say I do."

"If you ever see him in this Gulch, or near it, or have a good chance at him anywhere, just go for him!"

"You want him wiped out?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"I'd be glad to 'put him under for fifty, as I've got a grudge ag'inst the young cuss; but he's a tough subject to tackle, and five hundred ain't a bit too high. I'll lay for him, old man."

Howard Creveling found himself a prisoner. He was assigned to an inner apartment of the cavern, which was always guarded. There was clearly no chance to escape, and he tried to resign himself to his situation.

He was in doubt as to what John Wilson's motive really was, but was sure that it could not be a good one. He was also sure that he would not suffer himself to be made a party to palming off upon the Creveling family as the heir of Balcombe any person who could not be proved to be his brother's son.

He wondered what had become of Bill the Blizzard. Had his guide gone off and left him to his fate, supposing that his task was done? He could not believe that the young man had been in league with his captors.

He saw no more of John Wilson or his supposed nephew; but he saw some of the men who frequented the haunt, and occasionally heard them as they spoke to each other in the large apartment.

There was nothing of interest or importance in their talk, except that they made it clear that they were a band of cattle-thieves and stage-robbers, of which John Wilson—commonly spoken of as Red Jack—was the head.

Once he heard a bit of conversation that struck him as very queer.

A big ruffian came into the cavern, cursing and complaining.

"Tell ye w'ot it is, boys," said the blusterer, "them Injuns of Conejo's up in the hills air git-tin' to be a leetle too durned sassy. Thar won't be no livin' fur 'em arter a while, 'less suthin' kin be done to check 'em!"

"What's the matter now, Old Rusty?" asked another.

"They're too durned free an' independent. Me an' Sam Brawner went up thar airly this mornin' to look about, an' we come across a good-lookin' red-skin gal, and we put arter her to run her down. A young buck dodges in afore us, an' calls a halt. I shot the buck down, in course, an' up starts a dozen or two more of 'em, who begun poppin' at us right lively. Sam lost a slice outer his arm, an' we had to turn tail an' make good time to git away from 'em. Tell ye w'ot, boys, it's outrageous. This won't be no kentry for a white man to live in if sech goin's on is allowed. The Gov'ment ort to be made to trot in an' stir them red-skins up an' run 'em down a few."

"Indeed," thought Creveling, "this is a queer country—the queerest I ever saw or heard of."

Confinement began to grow irksome to the Englishman, and he became restless and irritable. The dampness of his abode brought on rheumatic pains, and he feared a general break-up of his system. His business, too, troubled him, and he was anxious to know what was going on at home, and to direct affairs there. He wished that he could see John Wilson, and asked after him.

After a while he did see him.

Red Jack brought him out into the large apartment of the cavern, and he straightway began to complain of his treatment, and to threaten vengeance if his confinement was continued.

He closed his complaint by saying that his business was suffering, and that he would be ruined unless he could be free to attend to it.

"Your business is all right," said Wilson.

"By the way, did you notice anything strange about it when you came to Apacheville?"

"Something very strange and quite unaccountable," he replied, and he told the story of his visits to the Casino, and the strange dis-patches he had received from London.

"I suppose you would like to have that matter explained," remarked Wilson. "It is simple enough. You are sure you did not send the money that relieved your firm?"

"Of course I am."

"No doubt, as I sent it myself."

"You did?"

"I did. I caused a credit of fifty thousand dollars to be cabled to your firm, and would have sent more if it had been necessary. As I told you, I am a rich man."

"But how did you know that there was trouble, and how did that girl at the Casino—"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Creveling. Go easy, and don't ask too many questions. You will perceive that I have kept myself informed about your affairs. And now, sir, if I had any evil

designs against you would I have been likely to advance that money? I am very fond of young Arthur Creveling, though you don't seem to take a fancy to him, and I could not bear that his uncle's house should go down unexpectedly for no fault of its own, when I could easily save it from bankruptcy. I did it for his sake. You are a childless widower, and it is reasonable to suppose that your nephew will be your heir."

"Of course he will. I am a thousand times obliged to you, Mr. Wilson, and you shall lose nothing by the transaction. But my business needs my attention, and I am weary of confinement. If I should accept your terms how soon could I leave this place?"

"Within ten days."

Mr. Creveling's resolution was shaken. The boy was away, and his unlikeness to the Crevelings was not then apparent. Wilson surely meant well, and what harm could there be in sending the lad ahead?

"If I could be sure that he is Arthur's son," he said.

"I offer you the best evidence that can be had—his father's letter and marriage certificate, and the testimony of Arthur Creveling's old servant and trusted friend. The evidence would be sufficient in a court of law here, and it ought to be amply sufficient for you."

"Will you swear that he is my brother's son?"

"I will. I don't believe there is a Bible here. That could hardly be expected. But I will swear it on my knees."

"Swear it, then, on your knees!"

The old man knelt on the stony floor and raised his right hand.

"Swear to no lie!"

This unexpected and startling interruption was not by Howard Creveling, who was as much astonished by it as the other.

It seemed to come from the interior of the cavern, or from over their heads—they could not well make out the direction—and was clearly a woman's voice. Harsh and shrill, but unmistakably a woman's voice.

"What is that?" exclaimed the old man, jumping up.

Again they heard it, quite close to them.

"Swear to no lie!"

Wilson looked around in amazement and terror. Then he raised an outcry, which speedily brought in three men who had been loitering outside.

"There is a woman concealed in here somewhere," said he. "Find her!"

The men hooted at the idea, and declared that it was impossible that a woman should have got into the cavern.

"But there is a woman here. She spoke to me twice, and I heard her as clearly as I hear you, and this gentleman heard her."

"Indeed I did," said Mr. Creveling, and the search began.

The entire cavern was thoroughly ransacked. Not a nook or crevice was left unexplored, and even the blankets and skins were turned over. But not the faintest trace of the owner of the mysterious voice was found.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DANDY FROM TOPNOTCH.

AGAIN Marta was seated behind her table at the upper end of the Casino, while the customary crowd was congregated about the bar and the gaming tables.

This time she was not absently shuffling a pack of cards, but was engaged in an employment better fitted to her fair hands. With colored worsteds, she was doing some fanciful work in crochet.

It was an employment that was strangely out of keeping with the place and the crowd, but not more so than herself.

Though she knitted deftly and swiftly, her mind did not seem to be on her work, and every now and then she sighed.

After a while she dropped her needle, and leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand.

"Something has happened," she said to herself. "I am sure of it. I feel it in my bones. If dad was at home I would be tempted to go and ask him to put me to sleep, so that I might take a look, though I have such a dread of seeing things."

Her reverie was interrupted by the approach of two young men. One of them was Jack Brinker, a big, tall fellow, genial and free hearted, a general favorite in Apacheville. The other was a graceful and handsome man, dressed "to the nines" as a frontier dandy—that is to say, with a jaunty velvet coat, low-cut vest, frilled shirt, white corduroy trowsers tucked into shining boots, low rolling collar, broad felt hat, long black hair, and tapering mustache.

"Put up your knittin', Miss Marta, and 'tend to business," said jolly Jack. "I've brought you a customer who is dead froze to tackle you at poker or euchre or anythin' you choose to name. Miss Marta, I interjue Dave Hillyer, a card sharp from the Topnotch deestrick."

Marta looked up at the stranger with a smile.

"I am afraid he is too pretty to play cards," she said.

"If pretty spoils folks for playing," promptly replied the stranger, "you could never win a cent."

"Well, sir, I must say that you got in on time. That was a very nice compliment, and it came as quick as a shot. But I must ask you to excuse me to night, Mr. Hillyer. Something has happened, or is going to happen, to trouble me, and I am all out of shape. I don't feel a bit like playing."

"I am sorry to hear that, Miss Marta. I have cleaned out all the boys about Topnotch, and have come down here to try to take the shine out of Apacheville. I hope you can give me a chance before long."

"I hope so, Mr. Hillyer, but not now."

The card sharp from Topnotch bowed, and the two men walked away.

Hardly had they left her when Marta saw a well-known form enter at the wide-open door, and push swiftly through the throng.

"It was not that, thank the Lord!" she muttered, as a sudden flush rose in her face.

The new-comer was Bill, the Blizzard. He came straight to Marta, and seated himself near her, looking sad and serious.

"What is the matter, Bill?" she asked. "What has happened?"

"Bad luck, Marta. I have lost the Englishman."

"Is that it? I knew something was up. What do you mean by 'lost' him?"

"He has been gobbled up by Red Jack's gang, I suppose," replied the Blizzard, and he told the story of the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Creveling.

"I found the trail and followed it down the Gulch," he said. "It went into a hole in the rock that leads up to Red Jack's den, no doubt. I didn't try to go any further, as it would be merely throwing myself away."

"I am glad of that, Jack. It is a dangerous crowd, and of course that den is a dangerous place. I am sorry about the Englishman. He reminded me of something I can't remember. Do you understand that?"

"Of something you have dreamed, perhaps."

"Maybe so. I took a great liking to him."

"I wish you would take a great liking to me, Marta."

"Why, Bill, I like you ever so much—better than any one else."

"Will you marry me, then, Marta?"

"Don't talk like that, please. Drop it. You mustn't think of such a girl as I am. How could you take a wife out of such a place as this? You come of decent folks, but my father may have been a devil, and my mother a witch for all I know."

"What have your mother and father got to do with it? Your head is level, and your heart is true, and you are better every way than I am. I am a nobody, an orphan, with no kin that I know of anywhere."

"And you were only a little fellow, Bill, when you were made an orphan," said Marta, in a sympathizing tone.

"Only thirteen. My father had a ranch on the Upper Arkansas then. He was a college-bred man, and had taught me something, but shooting better than all. He and I started to look up some stray cattle, and, as we were riding along, a bunch of Comanches plumped into us from a mottle of timber."

"Father fell dead at the first fire. I dropped into a water-hole, and opened on them with my rifle and six-shooter. Then I got hold of father's tools, and kept it up."

I stood them off until near night, and then some Texas men came up on a cattle trail and pulled me out. There were half a dozen Comanches dead, and after that the folks about there called me Little Blizzard.

"We took father home, and mother never held up her head again. In a few weeks she followed him."

"That is a sad story, Bill; but I wish I knew as much as that about myself. What were we talking about?"

"About my wanting you for my wife."

"Let us drop it, then. Don't say another word about that until I get clear of this Casino. I don't know how it is, but since I have seen the Englishman, I have been half crazy to leave this place. Oh, Bill, it was the Englishman that we were talking about, and how you lost him."

"Yes; that was what we began on."

"What are you going to do about it, Bill?"

"I don't exactly know, and I came here to consult you. I shall do all I can for him, of course. I believe his life is safe, but have a notion that they mean to hold him for ransom. To get him out of the hands of that gang will take some good men to back me, and they will cost money. The Englishman would pay well, I don't doubt, and I would spend the money free enough if I had it; but I happen to be nearly broke."

"How much do you suppose it would cost?" asked Marta.

"About five hundred dollars."

"I wish I had the money for you; but mine is locked up, and Mr. Crafton has gone off somewhere, I don't know where. If he was at home I would go right away and get it for you. As

Bill, the Blizzard.

soon as I see him I will make him give it to me. You can wait a little while I hope?"

"Yes. The Englishman's life is safe, I suppose. I will go and scout around Tenspot Gulch awhile. I am curious to know the secret of that hole."

"Take care of yourself, Bill, and come back soon."

When the Blizzard had left the Casino, Marta leaned back in her chair and fell into a brown study, from which she roused herself with a start.

"Why not?" she muttered. "Just this once, it is for a good cause, and this shall be the last time."

Catching the eye of Jack Brinker, who was circulating in the crowd below, she beckoned to him, and he came to her at once.

"I have changed my mind," she said. "I feel better now, and if your friend wants a quiet game, I will accommodate him."

Brinker hurried away, and returned with Dave Hillyer, whose eyes sparkled as he sat down at the table.

"What shall it be?" he asked.

"Eucher," answered Marta, "as that looks the least like gambling."

The two played a number of games of eucher, with equal skill, and with almost equal luck, though the advantage was slightly on Marta's side.

Precious little progress at that.

"Don't you think this is a little tame?" asked the dandy from Topnotch.

"I suppose we will have to fall back on poker," replied Marta, with a sigh.

Poker it was, and the luck of the young mistress of the Casino began and increased in a style that astonished her antagonist.

After losing pretty heavily he sent for a fresh pack of cards, and gained a little.

Then after a few deals, there was a big jackpot on the table between them, and Hillyer had the luck to open it. Marta joined him, and each drew three cards.

The betting and bluffing began, and Marta was obliged to borrow from Jack Brinker to keep her row up. There was nearly a thousand dollars at stake.

Hillyer called, and Marta threw down a triumphant hand, three aces and a small pair against his three kings.

"You are too much for me to night, Miss Marta," said the young man. "It would be foolish for me to ask revenge now, as you have a growing luck. I can see that in your eyes. Some other time."

"I shall never play another game of cards for money, Mr. Hillyer."

"Indeed! I should be the last to ask you to break a good resolution. There are plenty of fellows to make me even. But I shall want to see you again."

"Come when you please. I like your style."

When the two men had left her, Marta counted her money, and locked it in her table drawer.

"I wonder if Bill has left town," she said. "I wish I could see him. I have money enough now to raise a party to hunt the Englishman."

CHAPTER X.

THIEF AGAINST THIEF.

SILE BRUNTON was not a new-comer in Apacheville. He was quite an old citizen, having resided there more than two months, and might have aspired to office if he had been so inclined.

Nobody knew where he had come from, and nobody cared. He had brought money into the new mining country, and considerable of it, and that was enough to know about him.

As soon as he "struck" Apacheville he struck into a tremendous spree, and for a week there was a wild man loose. But he had sense enough in his maddest or stupidest moments to keep his own counsel and to take care of his money.

While he was on this "tear" he bought into the Panchita mine, an unprofitable claim that was going a-begging for capital, though its discoverer and owner had great confidence in its future.

Everybody laughed at the drunken fool from nobody knew where, who had sunk his money in that hopeless hole in the ground.

But luck seems to follow some people, in spite of their faults or follies, and it had been decreed that Sile Brunton was to have, at least for a time, a run of big luck.

Hardly had he invested in the Panchita mine, when it developed a fine vein of rich ore, and the value of the "hopeless hole" increased rapidly.

Thereafter he had nothing to do but draw his profits and take his ease, holding a heavy balance with Hegman & Bunsell, the leading bankers of Apacheville.

His idea of enjoying life was drinking and gambling, and to these pursuits he devoted himself. But he had a hard head and an iron constitution, such as could "stand off" even the liquor of Apacheville for a long time, and he did not lose much by gambling, and was careful to keep clear of dangerous disputes.

Consequently Sile Brunton was respected as one of the solid men of Apacheville, and possibly

in the course of time he might have gone to Congress and figured as a "self-made man," if his luck had stuck to him.

In an evil hour for himself his eyes settled on Marta.

Many other men had seen her, and had not been harmed by the sight; but it happened to Sile Brunton to fall desperately in love with the young mistress of the Casino.

On this one point his head lost its balance. In this one business he was an impulsive, reckless fool. The sight of Marta would intoxicate him more quickly and thoroughly than any of the strong drinks of Apacheville, and he could not have known a wilder style of intoxication.

For Sile Brunton was about the last person in the world to whom Marta could take any sort of a fancy. He was as far as possible from being her "style." She treated his advances with contempt, and took no pains to conceal her aversion for him.

All this maddened him the more, and made him the more determined that she should be his, in one shape or another, by fair means or foul.

If he had not been intoxicated by his passion, as well as by liquor, he would not have forced himself upon her at the Casino, and secured a knock down from Howard Creveling for his insolence to her.

Had it not been for that same intoxication, he would not have allowed the Englishman to master him so easily.

His ignominious defeat upon that occasion, had filled him with shame and anger, and to his eagerness to gain possession of Marta was added a strong desire to revenge himself upon her and her friends.

While he was biding his time and forming schemes for this purpose, he was met by an unpleasant annoyance.

He lived on the edge of the town, in a dilapidated shanty, which was fine enough and comfortable enough for his needs. He had not been dandled in the lap of luxury, and took more naturally to such surroundings as he had been accustomed to than those which his money might have procured.

The only other occupant of the shanty was Pedro, a Mexican boy, who prepared his irregular meals, and cared for him after a fashion.

One night, when he had staggered home under a heavy load of tanglefoot, he sat before a wretched fire, by the dim light of a dirty lamp, smoking his pipe, and amusing himself with cursing Pedro and teasing a stray cat which the boy had taken under his protection.

There was a knock at the door.

It might have startled some people, and it did startle Pedro; but Sile Brunton was made of sterner stuff. He was not the sort of man who could be easily startled. Personally he was fearless, and he never kept any money or valuables in his cabin.

"Come in!" he grunted, and the low door opened, and a man stooped as he entered.

He was a tall man, and there was a broad red scar on the right side of his face, that reached from his forehead nearly to his chin.

A noticeable man anywhere—a man of "mark"—the same man who had been seen by Bill the Blizzard at the north when he came upon a night encampment of two other men.

"What's wanted?" growled Brunton. "I don't see comp'ny here, and this is a late hour for visitin'."

"I want a private talk with you, mister," said the stranger.

"All right. Fire ahead."

Brunton pushed a stool to his visitor, who lowered his tall form upon it.

There was a small and rickety table between them, and on this the stranger leaned his elbows; and bent upon his host a mysterious glance that drew a frown from the latter.

"I told you that I wanted a private talk," he said.

"Fire ahead, I say."

"You might not want that boy to hear it."

"Stuff an' nonsense! This is private enough for me. I hain't got no secrets, and don't want no other man's secrets. If you've come to borrow money, you won't get it. If it's anythin' else, spit it out, and let's have it over with. It's my bedtime."

"My name is Sam Byers," said the stranger.

"Well, what o' that?"

"And yours is Billy Button."

The stranger, who was looking intently at Brunton, thought that he detected a change in his countenance; but that may have been fancy. If there was any change, it was a very slight and transient one. Sile Brunton's red cheeks did not bear a shade of color, and his twinkling eyes looked direct into the eyes of his visitor.

"That's where you're out at the start, Mr. Byers," said he. "My name is Brunton, and I don't know any man in these parts of the name of Button."

"I am sure that your name is Billy Button," insisted Byers.

"You aint! That kinder beats me. You know more'n I do about it, I reckon, though I ought to be sober enough to know my own name. Menbe you know more about it than

the people of Apacheville, who know Sile Brunton as well as any man who walks the streets."

"I know that you are known here as Brunton, but there was a time, not long ago, when you went by the name of Billy Button, and that is the time I want to talk to you about. I have come here as the agent of Dick Clements and Bob Risley."

Again the stranger looked intently into Brunton's face, but his man did not move a muscle.

"Pards o' yourn?" he quietly asked. "Reckon on you've got things a leetle mixed. I don't know any sech men."

"You did know them some three months or more ago, when you met them in Missouri, and when you were known as Billy Button. They were your pards then, and the three of you went through a train on the Iron Mountain road, and made a big haul. Yet got the scads to take care of, and ran off with them. Your pards hunted you, of course, until they got you down fine, and now they want you to give up their share, with enough extra to pay them for their trouble."

Brunton turned so that he could look his visitor squarely in the face, and there was a dangerous look in his twinkling eyes.

"So that's your game," he said. "Of all the cheeky rascals I've come across yet you hold the belt. I would be doin' right to break your head and kick you out of here."

"Perhaps this might persuade you not to try it," said Sam Byers, showing a pistol.

"It wouldn't bother me a bit; but my head is set ag'in fightin' and all kinds of scrapes. I want to git on peaceable with everybody, if I kan, and so I'll allow that you've mistaken the man."

"But I haven't," insisted Byers.

"If you hadn't, you must take me for a durned blubber-headed fool. If I had done such a trick, would I let anybody come it over me? What could those men you speak of make out o' me! Would they go to law, or inform on me and put themselves in a hole? Not much, I reckon. They wouldn't scare me out of a cent."

"Shall I tell Dick Clements and Bob Risley, then, that you refuse to settle with them?"

"I don't care what you tell them or anybody else. I give you to understand, as plain as words can say it, that my name ain't Button, that I don't know those men you speak of, that I never set foot in Missouri, that I was never in the train-robbin' business, that you won't git a red cent out o' me by any scheme you kin fix up, and that if you bother me any more I'll have you in the lock-up."

"Very well, Mr. Billy Button. I understand you well enough. I have given you a fair chance to do the fair thing, and you refuse. Somebody else will have to take charge of this case now. That is all I have to say."

Sam Byers stooped his tall form, and passed out through the low door.

Sile Brunton made a sign to the Mexican lad, who slipped away and followed him in the darkness.

It was not until he was at a considerable distance from Brunton's cabin that Sam Byers was joined by two men, who stole out of unperceived holes or corners and overtook him.

"What luck, Sam?" asked one.

"It's no go, boys. He is as stubborn as a mule, and every bit as foolish. Are you sure he is the right man, Dick?"

"No doubt of that. Not the least chance of doubt. I could have picked him out among a thousand."

"Then he's got the most amazing cheek of any man I ever met. He denies it all, boys, and defies us, and threatens to have me arrested if I tackle him again."

"He is a terrapin," said Dick Clements. "But there is a way to get through his shell. If kind words won't do any good, we will have to fling rocks."

"We've got to hornswaggle him," remarked Bob Risley.

"That's so. If we don't get even with that bloody pirate, set me down for a sucker."

"What will you do?" asked Byers.

"We will strike him for all he is worth this time."

CHAPTER XI.

HOT ON THE TRAIL.

To say that Sile Brunton was worried by his encounter with the tall stranger would be putting the case rather mildly.

Though he was worried, he was not cowed.

A bulldog in a pit, when the other bulldog has seized him by a neck or leg hold, may feel that he is in a tight place, and see no way to free himself from those murderous jaws; but he does not give up the fight or whine for help. He endures his punishment bravely, and waits for a chance to get a more deadly hold on his antagonist.

Sile Brunton was built on the bulldog pattern, and was game to the last degree.

There was a shade less red in his cheeks after Byers left him; but there was no sign of scare or surrender in his heavy, dogged face. His lips were contracted, and his brows were drawn down, and his look was that of bulldog tenacity.

"They had better leave me alone," he said.

"If they fool with me they will run against a dangerous man. Would I give it up now, when I've got it so safe and sure? If I give 'em an inch, they'd take an ell. Once begin payin' them, and there's no tellin' where it would end. If they thought they had a leg hold, they'd just chaw and chaw. There's only one place to stop such a game, and that's right at the beginnin'. I don't need to be scared. They can't put me in a hole without gettin' in themselves. Let 'em just go in and get squeezed! I reckon I've got more friends in these parts than they ken scare up."

Then he walked the floor until Pedro slipped in as silently as he had slipped out.

"Well, boy, what did you see and hear?"

"I saw two men come out of the darkness and join that man, and they talked as they walked along. But they were out in the open, so that it was hard to sneak up and listen, and when I got near enough they had stopped talking. I only heard one of them say, 'We will strike him for all he is worth.'"

"They will, will they? More'n one ken play at that game. What did the other two look like?"

Pedro described them as well as he could.

"I don't make much out of that," said Brunton; "but I reckon I know 'em. Here's a dollar for you, boy. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut."

Tough and determined as Sile Brunton was, he was not without uneasiness. He knew that he had to deal with desperate men, and that he must be prepared to play a desperate game. He did not try to delude himself into the belief that the men who had followed him so far would rest quietly at the end of the trail.

He kept his eyes and ears open, and made a resolute effort to keep his head clear. When he went into town in the morning he went sober, and his many acquaintances were surprised at the sudden change in his habits. He drank only enough to put his nerves in trim, and went about his business in a quiet and orderly manner.

But he had not much business to attend to, as his affairs were mostly managed by his partner in the Panchita mine, and time hung very heavily on his hands when he kept away from his usual haunts and refrained from his customary pastimes.

In the lack of anything else to occupy his leisure he sauntered into a billiard room, with the intention of playing a few games of pool.

There were only two players there, a couple of idle men, who were glad enough to have him join them.

He was anything but a scientific or skillful player, but he had the strength and the will to knock the balls about vigorously, so that if luck favored him he stood a fair chance to win.

On this occasion luck did favor him. It often happens that fortune, playing with men, will give a fellow a bright run of small successes just before treating him to a sudden and severe knock-down.

Sile Brunton won so steadily and so unreasonably that one of the men quit the game and the room in disgust.

"I can play a little pool," he said, "but durn my skin if I can stand any such hog-killin' scrimmage as that."

Brunton and the remaining man had a game to play off, and they went at it, the former knocking the balls about with his usual vigor.

He had been looking at this man pretty closely during the games, as if he knew him, but could not "place" him. The more he looked the more he was sure that there was something familiar to him in the man's face, but he could not for the life of him say where he had seen him.

The game was won, and Brunton left the room.

When he stepped into the passage that led to the street, his late antagonist was at his heels, and accosted him.

"You have been looking at me," said he, "as if you thought you might have seen me somewhere."

"That's a fact," replied Brunton. "But there are so many faces, you know."

"I am Dick Clements," said the stranger, pulling off a false beard, "and you are Billy Button."

But the bulldog was not to be caught off his guard.

"Come, now," he said, in a mocking tone, "that sort o' thing won't do. You can't play those games on me. A man tried it last night; but it wouldn't do."

"Do you mean to say that you don't know me, Billy Button?"

"I don't know you from Adam, and my name ain't Billy Button, either."

"You know me as Dick Clements, and you are the man I knew in Missouri as Billy Button. I and Bob Risley have run you down, and I am here to offer you a fair chance to do the fair thing. It's the last chance, and if you don't come to time we will be down on you like a land-slide."

Sile Brunton's lips were drawn tightly together, and his brows were pulled down more than ever. The same look of bulldog tenacity.

"I offer you a fair chance to shut your mouth or have your face smashed," said he. "I ain't the kind to be picked up and pickled by any of your cussed blackmailin' schemes. Get out o' my way, you durned scoundrel, or I'll break your head and then hand you over to the law."

He raised his big fist, as if to put his threat in execution; but Dick Clements quietly stepped aside, and he passed out into the street.

"They're hot on my trail," he muttered, as he walked away; "but I've gi'n 'em to understand that I mean fight all the time. They can't bullyrag Sile Brunton."

But this second encounter upset him to an extent that he would have been ashamed to show. His nerves, which had not had their customary supply of stimulus during the day, were unsettled, and he felt that he needed something to brace them up.

He sought a saloon, and poured out for himself such a large allowance of "pison" that the bar-keeper opened his eyes.

But it was necessary not only to settle his nerves, but to drown out the thought of the trouble that had come upon him. He felt himself able to meet it, at any time and in any condition, and why should he let it worry him when he could drive it from his brain?

He forgot the good resolution with which he had begun the day, cast discretion to the winds, and took the downward track at a more reckless gait than ever.

So one drink led to another, and from one saloon he went to another, and here and there he gambled, and his luck was so sure and steady that he filled his pockets with other men's money.

At night he "brought up" at the Casino, where, after treating and being treated by his acquaintances there, he finally subsided into a seat, where he soaked his clay at his leisure, and feasted his eyes on the unmasked beauty of Marta.

He sat until a late hour, and the Casino was nearly ready to close when he staggered out.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD TO DEATH.

As the big brute who answered in Apacheville to the name of Brunton meandered along on his way to the shanty he called home, he was in that stupid, half-conscious condition which is styled boozy.

He knew that he had been making a fool of himself; but it seemed to him just then a pleasant thing to be a fool. He had gazed at Marta until he had been seized by a double intoxication, and the two halves of his brain, contending with each other, had produced a mental stagnation.

He was just in the condition to fall an easy prey to whatever foes might watch him closely enough to fall upon him then and there.

And there were those who had watched him closely through the day, and were still watching him.

As he approached a small abandoned cabin, three men sprung out from behind a rock and seized him unawares.

He was so suddenly overborne that he could not have resisted the attack, even if he had been in possession of his senses.

A coat was pulled tightly over his head, his hands were secured, and he was hurried into the empty cabin.

When he was allowed the use of his eyes, he saw that he was confronted by those men, one of whom flashed a dark-lantern upon him, and the other two presented cocked revolvers at his devoted head.

"If you try to get away or to make a noise," said one of them, "it's sure death."

This might have looked like the usual style of highway robbery if Sile Brunton had not known the men who had captured him.

One was unmistakably Sam Byers, who had come to his cabin to negotiate with him. Another was Dick Clements, the man he had met in the pool room. The third, though disguised, was sure to be Bob Risley.

Brunton did not lose his presence of mind. In fact, he regained it. He made no outcry, and knew that it would be useless to attempt to escape. But he was just sufficiently muddled to defy his adversaries to an unlimited extent.

"You think you've got me foul, you cusses," he said, quietly but doggedly. "Well, what are you goin' to do about it?"

"We are going to square up with you, you cursed pirate," replied Dick Clements, "and we mean to make a sure thing of it. You have had two chances—two fair offers—to set us even, and you have chosen to be a mule, a hog, a dog, and everything that's beastly."

"Think ye're smart, don't ye?" muttered Brunton, with a smile.

"We are smart enough to get even with you, and you will find that out before long. We don't mean to settle with you now short of a pile."

"How big a pile? and how are you goin' to get it?"

"Ten thousand dollars is the sum."

"Ten thousand durned fools!"

"That's the sum you've got to fork out, and you needn't fool yourself into thinking that you won't have to do it. We know that you don't carry that much money about with you, and that you don't keep it in your shanty; but we know that you have a big balance in bank, and that is what we mean to go for. You've got to sign a check for ten thousand dollars."

Sile Brunton was getting sober under the pressure of his peril, and he was becoming more like his natural self—a queer compound of shrewdness, stupidity and stubbornness. There was no way of escape, and he knew his men well enough to be sure that they would kill him if he should call for help; nor was there the faintest hope that his cry would be answered.

The dark lantern, though its light was flashed only upon him, illuminated the interior of the cabin to a certain extent, and he noticed that the shutter of the single window was partly open. It was possible that the light might attract the attention of some belated passer by. At all events, it was worth while to try to gain time.

"Supposin' I should write a check," he said, "what good would it do you? Hain't you got sense enough to know that I would go and stop payment the fust thing in the mornin'?"

"We will give you no chance to do that," replied Clements. "We mean to keep you out of the way until we get the cash and get off with it."

"Oho! That's the game, hey? And when you had got the cash, you would kill me to make a square end-up?"

"No, we will let you go then."

"Mebbe you would; more like you wouldn't. I reckon I must take my chances. But there ain't no check-paper here, nor nothin'."

"Here's a check ready for you to sign, and here's pen and ink."

"Got it all fixed, hey? Think you've got the dead wood on me, do you?"

"We are sure of that, and you had better stop blowing. There is no sort of an excuse now to keep you from signing."

"Yes, there is—a sort of an excuse."

"What is it?"

"Jest that I ain't a-goin' to do it—that's all."

Sile Brunton looked so stupid, and at the same time so shrewd, that his captors were puzzled. Was it a case of sheer unreasoning obstinacy; or was he playing some deep game which they could not guess at?

Dick Clements hesitated a moment, and Bob Risley savagely handled his revolver. Then Clements spoke:

"Billy Button, or Sile Brunton, or whatever you choose to call yourself, you are sober enough to know that your life is in our hands. You have got to do this thing or we will kill you, as sure as we know that you robbed us. Once more, will you sign that check?"

Brunton's red face flushed a little redder, and he did not look up.

"I'll see you in — first, and then I won't!" he stubbornly replied.

"Let me settle him," growled Bob Risley.

"Not just yet," said Clements. "I will give him one more chance. Last time, you bloody pirate! Will you sign?"

There was a pistol at Brunton's head, and another where he could look into it, and the deadly purpose of his captors could easily be read in their faces; but he did not flinch. His bulldog obstinacy was never tougher than at that moment.

"No!" came hoarsely from between his clinched teeth.

But the time had not quite come for Sile Brunton to die. He was on the road to death, but had not reached the end.

A pistol cracked, but it was not Clements's or Risley's.

Marta, flitting homeward like a shadow from the Casino, saw a light shining through the partly-open shutter of the deserted shanty. She had never before seen a light there, and wondered what it meant at that hour.

Noiselessly approaching the place, she heard the sound of voices, and curiosity prompted her to draw nearer.

Peering in at the window, she saw what was going on, and the few words she heard enabled her fully to comprehend the scene.

Fearless and chivalrous by nature, she acted promptly and effectively.

Throwing open the shutter, she fired her pistol in the window, at the same time shouting in as hoarse a voice as she could command:

"Here, Bill! Come up, Tom! Here they are, boys! Now we've got 'em!"

Two more shots she fired, and to every shot she added a shout.

Clements and his comrades were thrown into consternation, doubtless supposing that this was Sile Brunton's game, and that the police were on them in force.

Sam Byers, who was struck in the shoulder by the first of Marta's random shots, darted out of the cabin with a yell, and the two others were quick to follow him.

Such a panic was on them that they did not stop to face their assailants, or to note their numbers, but ran like scared wolves.

Marta emptied the remaining charges of her

revolver after them as they disappeared in the darkness.

Then she quietly stepped into the cabin.

The dark lantern had been dropped, but not extinguished. She picked it up, and perceived that Brunton's hands were tied.

The revulsion of feeling in him was so great that he was actually crying in a maudlin way. He began to stammer some words of thanks.

"None of that," said Marta. "I don't want to hear a word. It is bad enough as it is."

From some concealment upon her person she produced a knife, with which she cut the cord that bound the prisoner's hands.

"Now you are free," she said. "You had better go home and get sober. I hope, after this, that you will have the decency to leave me alone."

With this, she slipped out into the darkness, and flitted onward like a shadow.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END OF THE ROAD.

NOTHING is more reasonable than that Marta should believe that Sile Brunton, after the great benefit she had conferred upon him in saving his life, would cease to persecute her, and would refrain from everything that might annoy her.

Nothing is more certain than that such a course was at variance with his nature and far from his intentions.

Her ready wit, her perfect fearlessness, and the splendid style in which she came to his rescue, had increased his admiration of her immensely. The brief glimpse he had had of her in the deserted shanty by the light of the dark lantern had shown her to him as more radiant than ever, and the sight drove him wild.

His intoxication got beyond his power of control so far, that he did not care to control it. The steam of his passion was superheated, and there was bound to be an explosion.

What a girl she was! How handsome, fascinating, tempting! Brave as a lion, and smart as a steel-trap! What a partner she would make for such a man as he! He was sure that he was one of the world's lucky ones, and all he needed was such a woman to take care of his money and keep him out of scrapes. He would make her rich, he would worship her; he would knuckle down to her; he would obey her in all things; but he must first get her and have her for his own. In getting her he might have to be rough and brutal; but he would atone for that afterward.

He was alone with her as much as two minutes that night, and that surpassed all his ideas of heaven, if he had any. What would it be like to own her, to have her all to himself at any and all times! That was an end worth gaining at any cost.

He would have pressed his suit upon her then and there, in spite of her, if he had not been so badly dazed by one thing and another that he was unable to get his senses together.

Such were the thoughts and feelings that maddened Sile Brunton and drove him on to his doom.

He went home, but not to follow Marta's advice and get sober. He had come out of that night's peril, not with better resolutions, but with such an entire confidence in his luck, that he no longer deemed it necessary to take any sort of care of himself. After he had passed through such an experience safely, why should he fear anything?

Luck was on his side, and he could laugh at his enemies. Luck was on his side, and he should have anything he wanted, including Marta.

"You heard that fellow last night speak of two men, Pedro," he said to the Mexican boy. "They got after me to-night; but they were glad enough to slide off."

He let the boy shut up the house, helped himself to a big drink of whisky, and tumbled into bed.

It was late in the morning when he got up, with his head muddled and his nerves unstrung. The excitement of the night, on top of the day's dissipation, had overcome him.

He strolled into town, and began to repeat his rounds of the day before.

He drank heavily, and the liquor actually seemed to sober him. As a matter of fact it stupefied and deadened his senses. He passed through the day like a man in a maze, with no clear idea of what he was doing, but seeming to act in everything with his usual shrewdness and caution. At the end of any five minutes he could not have told what he had been doing or saying in that space of time.

He gambled and the luck that had attended him through the previous day did not leave him. He held whatever cards he wanted, and they came to him just when he wanted them. No matter how foolishly or recklessly he played, he could not help winning.

One after another the men who "tackled" him quit the game in disgust and with empty pockets, wondering at the man and his amazing luck.

"You had better take care of yourself, Sile Brunton," said one. "You are going to have a knock-down of some kind, as sure as carion draws buzzards. You've got the devil's own luck to-day, and the devil is bound to make you pay for it."

"Don't you fool yourself," huskily replied Brunton. "This is the kind of luck that sticks. It beats a gold mine. I'm in for a big run of it, and mean to make the best of it."

Night found him again in the Casino, where he drank with his acquaintances, and amused himself by "bucking" against a faro bank, until the dealer barred him out.

Then he sat down again, to soak his clay at his leisure, and to admire Marta.

His capacity for absorbing liquor was marvelous. He had been drinking steadily all day, and he kept on drinking steadily nearly all night. Where the drinks went to was the wonder. It did not get into his legs, and it did not seem to mount to his head. Yet there was but one face in that room that he could see clearly. All the others swam in a mist before him.

The one face that he could see was Marta's, and she had her mask on that night.

There was a superstition connected with the red mask. Most of the people who knew Marta believed that she could "see things"—that she could look into the future, and foresaw what was going to happen. When anything unusual was expected to occur, she wore that red mask.

Consequently it was almost universally regarded as a sort of storm signal, and the frequenters of the Casino were on the watch for some unusual development.

Sile Brunton cared not a straw for that sort of thing. It never entered his thoughts, which were running on a wild track of their own, independent of his surroundings, and beyond his control.

If he saw the mask, he saw through it. That is to say, he saw Marta with his mind's eye just as he had seen her the night before, when she came to his rescue in the deserted shanty—radiant, charming, fascinating, tempting.

The inward and the outward sight made him frantic, and the crazy thought came to him that she would then and there smile upon him and listen to his suit, if he was bold enough to press it.

"If she was set against me as strong as she says, why did she put herself out to help me in a pinch? She wouldn't ha' done that unless she kinder liked me."

That was the way his muddled thought shaped itself.

He determined to go and "tackle" her, to put his opinion to the proof.

Her head was down as he approached her, and she was busy with her crochet work and deep in her own thoughts.

She did not look up until he stood before her, and then he began to speak, in a husky, mumbling voice, that could not be easily understood.

"Miss Marta," he said, "you pulled me out of a mighty tight place last night. You chipped in jest when you was wanted, and held the winnin' hand. You're a keener, you are, and I'm bettin' on you all the time. I know you wouldn't ha' done that trick for everybody, and I want to make you my wife and give you a chance to get square."

The portion of her face that was visible turned nearly as red as her mask, and her eyes flashed fiercely as she looked up, amazed at the man's audacity.

"I've got lots o' money and lots o' luck," he went on to say. "I ken make you rich, and you shall be the boss. All you've got to do is to say the word."

Then she flamed up.

"Sile Brunton, I told you that if you ever came within ten feet of me again, I would kill you, and I meant it. I hate and despise you too much to want to look at you. Leave this room, you dirty, drunken scoundrel, or I will shoot you like a dog! Clear out, I say!"

Her pistol shone in her hand, and she would have been as good as her word, if some men who heard her sharp and angry words had not rushed up and hustled her persecutor away.

The half-dazed brute was ignominiously ejected from the Casino.

He made no show of fight, but went to another saloon, where he "fired up."

When he came out he stood for a few minutes in the street, turning things over in his tangled brain, after his own fashion.

"That settles it," he muttered. "I've tried fair dealin' with her, and she won't have it. Now she's got to put up with the other thing."

He felt in his pockets, which were full of money. He felt for his pistol, which was safe in his hip pocket.

Then he stumbled slowly toward his home, along the road that Marta must take in going from the Casino to John Crafton's house.

He did not go to his own habitation, but stopped near the abandoned shanty where he had been in peril and concealed himself behind the rock from which the three men who captured him had sprung out.

A little more than half an hour after he had left the Casino, Marta came out and flitted like a shadow on her homeward way.

Early in the morning Sile Brunton was found lying in the road near the deserted shanty, stone dead.

There was a bullet-hole in his forehead, and near him was found a small seven-shooter, of costly make, with one of the chambers discharged.

It was Marta's pistol.

CHAPTER XIV.

A GENUINE BLIZZARD.

THE SUN was slowly climbing down the western sky as a traveler rode alone across the broad plateau that is one of the leading features of the landscape west of Apacheville.

This traveler was the same dandified sporting-man who was introduced to Marta at the Casino as Dave Hillyer, from the Topnotch district, and his apparel was the same which he had worn at that time and place. It was neat and picturesque, and proper enough for ordinary weather, but far from sufficient to protect him from the extremity that was approaching.

For there was a terrible stress of weather preparing and hurrying forward from the north—such as can cause the bravest to shudder, and can put to shame the speed of the swiftest.

He had been riding slowly toward the south, with his head down, absorbed in reveries or meditation, permitting his tired horse to pick his way as he pleased over the bard and rough surface of the plateau.

So he had not noticed the black and lurid mass of cloud, with a ragged red edge, that was rapidly rising behind him. If he had noticed it, he would not have known its fearful import, as he had never had any personal experience of the style of tempest it foreboded.

The first intimation he had of its approach was a breath of cool air, that contrasted strangely with the sultry atmosphere through which he had been riding.

He thought it very refreshing; but a look at the darkening sky told him that there was something behind it that might be anything but pleasant.

A storm was coming—no doubt of that—and it would be advisable to seek shelter, if any could be found.

There was no sort of shelter anywhere in sight. As far as he could see stretched the bare brown plain, covered with shifting sands and sharp stones, where the only growth was that of the dwarf cactus and the creosote plant.

But there must be an end of this barren waste somewhere, and he spurred his horse forward. The brave beast, which had been snorting and whining in anticipation of the coming blast, made such speed as it could over the desert of rock and sand.

Dave Hillyer was soon to learn that it is impossible to outrun a hurricane.

In an incredibly short space of time the cool breeze became a cold wind that chilled him through, and he shivered as he buttoned up his coat. Looking back, he was amazed as he saw the tempest driving down upon him.

"This must be what they call a blizzard in Minnesota," he said. "Down here it is a norther. In either place it is a good thing for a man to get away from—if he can."

If he can! Ah! there's the rub. Ride faster, Dave Hillyer! Use your sharp spurs, and urge your frightened and willing horse to greater efforts—all in vain! Your tired steed is no match for "the viewless coursers of the air." The rocks and flints and shifting sands through which he must pick his way are not such a clear and easy path as the tempest finds before it.

Urged by his own terror, as well as by his master's fear, the horse did his best, and almost seemed to fly as he struggled and panted before the wind. But the wind was swifter than he, and it raised such whirling clouds of sand and dust that Dave Hillyer could no longer see anything. He could only guard his eyes, and trust to the instinct of his horse to push on in the right direction.

The hail was upon them before they knew it. It was preceded by a flurry of fine, icy rain, that struck like needle points, seeming to pierce the skin wherever it was exposed. Then came the hail, at first in small particles, but soon in lumps and chunks and masses of ice, that rattled against the stones like musket balls in a sharp engagement.

Dandy Dave Hillyer had been chilled through by the biting wind; then the sharp and freezing rain had cut him to the bone; now the big hailstones that were showered upon his unprotected person nearly overcame him. He had never known such a drain upon his vital force—such a cutting, crushing, killing storm as this.

But the change from wind to rain and hail had one good effect. The clouds of sand and dust were laid, and the almost helpless rider could look ahead for some distance over the storm-swept plain.

He saw that which cheered his fainting heart and gave him hope.

Not more than a mile away he saw a tall pile of rock, a mass upheaved from the volcanic plain, and never was a sight more welcome to his smarting eyes. A heap of gold that he could have by claiming it—a sequence flush with a big pot on the board—the radiant face of Marta of

the Casino—nothing could have moved him as that did.

There was sure to be shelter in that rocky ridge, and he would be safe if he could reach it.

If he could reach it! Ah! there was the rub again.

Again with voice and spur he urged forward his tired and stumbling horse, and the poor beast did his best. But the storm was raging more fiercely than ever; the wind blew wilder and more icily; the trembling limbs of the exhausted animal almost refused to bear the rider who could scarcely keep his seat.

Then one of the horse's feet dropped into a hole or crevice in the plain, and he stumbled and fell forward, throwing his stiffened rider over his head.

Dave Hillyer was dazed by his fall, if not stunned; but the cold air and the rattling hail soon revived him.

He looked up, and saw his horse vanishing in the direction of the ridge that loomed up darker than the darkness of the storm—"so near, and yet so far!"

His last hope was gone.

Yet he did not abandon the struggle, but raised himself with difficulty and endeavored to push on.

The effort was in vain. He had taken but a few painful and uncertain steps when his legs refused to do their duty, and he sank upon the hard, wet and icy plain.

The last use he made of his departing senses was to draw his pistols, putting all the energy of despair into the task and empty all its chambers in the direction of the rock of safety.

The reports were like those of pop-guns in the rush and whirl of the storm. A hopeless hope; but he would miss no chance.

A hopeless hope, yet it bore fruit right speedily. The wind that was chilling the hand that fired the shots carried their sound to the ridge of rock just beyond—faintly, but surely enough—and to the keenest of ears that were always awake to the least unusual noise.

Two dark faces peered out from behind a point of the rocky rampart, and saw a riderless horse shambling toward them.

Then half a dozen dark forms, well wrapped in blankets, hurried forth from the shelter of the rocks. Two of them led the horse to the place from which they had emerged, and four fought their way against the driving and blinding storm to the man who lay nearly dead under the sleet and on the stones.

There seemed to be no life left in him when they lifted him. Indeed, his limbs were stiff and his face was rigid. But they carried him swiftly away, now with the howling wind helping them, and bore him to the lee side of the ridge, where tents were pitched and where a bright fire was burning in the shelter of a rock.

CHAPTER XV.

A WHITE PERIL AND A RED RESCUE.

BILL BRANCH reconnoitered Tenspot Gulch carefully and closely.

He did not admit any such fear of the locality as some other people confessed to. He knew that he had safely gone through the Gulch more than once since it had been considered "extra hazardous," and he had not been uneasy on his own account when he proposed to conduct Mr. Creveling in there.

His immunity from attack might have been due to his good luck, or to a belief that he was not worth plundering, or to special favor that was shown him by the outlaws. It was sufficient for him to know that Tenspot Gulch had not thus far proved to be a dangerous locality for him.

He went into the Gulch as far as the gorge that led to the retreat of Red Jack's band. He did not know anything about that haunt, and knew but little as a certainty about the men who inhabited it; but he did know that the trail he had followed from the clump of timber went in and up there, and he had no doubt at all that the Englishman had been taken in that direction.

He searched the Gulch closely, but found no other opening in either of its sides. There was no route but that of the brook, which was a roaring stream in wet weather, and scarcely damp in dry weather. That was the route he must take to find the Englishman; but it would be useless to try to follow it alone, as there would be no hiding-places from enemies on the way, and if he should reach the end he could do nothing.

It was possible, he thought, that there was another way to reach the haunt of the marauders. If the brook came from their den, it must come from somewhere else to reach that place. If he could find the source, perhaps it might be easier to follow it down than to follow it up. He would look into the question from above.

Unharmed he had pursued his search in the Gulch, and unmolested he retraced his steps and emerged from that dark and dangerous locality.

But the directions given by Red Jack in the cavern had not been forgotten or neglected.

As the scout was riding along, seeking an easy route to the high ground, and when he had

come near to the clump of timber in which Mr. Creveling had been captured, two rifle shots, fired in quick succession, caused a change to come over the spirit of his dream.

One bullet whistled by his head, and the other struck his horse, which fell under him.

The Blizzard's action was as quick as thought, and was as much a matter of instinct as of reason.

As the horse fell, he slipped off on the side opposite to his concealed enemies, and the next instant he was lying in the shelter of the still struggling animal, with his repeating rifle ready for use.

He was hardly in position when a third shot came from the thicket, and he fired at the report, to let his assailants know that he appreciated their kind attentions.

Angered by the failure of their first attempt, and knowing well that they had a dangerous customer to deal with, they sent a volley from their concealment, and every bullet struck the body of the dead horse.

Then there was silence for a little while, broken only by a rustling and fluttering in the timber as an unseen man glided from one tree to another. Bill Branch perceived that it was the intention of his enemies to spread out and flank his position.

The situation was becoming serious, and he did not doubt that he would soon be forced to jump up and fight them in the open, against the double odds of numbers and cover, when an unlooked for and welcome relief came to him.

Suddenly there came down out of the hills, from some unseen avenue of approach, a tramping and galloping rush, mingled with savage yells and whoops.

Immediately the scout's field of vision was filled with a flurry of wild, dark horsemen, dashing through the timber and scampering over the open spaces, firing their guns, and yelling in the approved Apache style.

To these yells were added shouts and cries in unmistakable English, as Bill Branch's assailants in their turn found themselves attacked, with no chance to escape.

None of the flying bullets struck the Blizzard, and it was evident to him that he was not the object of the Apache attack.

He sat up, and calmly awaited the end of the fight, which came in a few moments.

Two Indians rode up to him, bringing a led horse, upon which they placed his saddle and bridle and blanket, and signed to him to mount.

"What does this mean?" asked the scout, who could speak the dialect of their tribe.

"We were not hunting you," replied the leader. "We were hunting wolves. We hated them. We have killed three of them, and they will chase our women no more. Come!"

"Where to?"

"To Felipa."

"And why should I go to Felipa?"

"My brother will be safe there."

"But I am safe here."

"Much safer there. The wolves are all about."

"Well, I will go to Felipa," replied the scout.

Why should he not? The Apaches who had come to his rescue hated Red Jack's rascals, and he might learn something from them that would further his search. He knew them as a part of Conejo's band, and knew that the Felipa who had been named was a medicine woman among them.

So he mounted the horse that had been brought to him, and rode away with the party.

Near the clump of timber he saw the corpses of three white men, stripped of their arms and accoutrements, and of their scalps. They had been dragged out into the trail, to give their comrades to understand that the Apaches were not afraid to strike when they were struck. As they had attempted to assassinate him, Bill Branch had no sympathy for them.

The Indians struck upward into the hills, and a brisk ride brought them, just before dusk, to the temporary camp of their band, which was on the south side of a ridge that stretched across a plateau.

Felipa came forward to receive them, and the Blizzard looked with curiosity at a woman whom he then saw for the first time, but of whom he had often heard, as she was reputed to have among the Apaches a great influence, which she usually exercised for their good and that of the white people.

She was not a remarkable woman to look at, nor of commanding appearance, being but little over the ordinary height of women, and lithe and graceful in form. The olive skin of her face was marked by strong lines, the black masses of her hair were thickly seamed with white, and her large dark eyes, when they were not blazing with excitement, had a soft and melancholy expression.

The leader of the band gave her his report in Apache, very briefly, and then she spoke in plain English to Bill Branch, whom she congratulated upon his escape, and welcomed to the camp.

"Conejo is very sick," she said. "He has been suffering for some weeks with a wasting

fever, and I am now acting as chief of the band. You will be safe with us, as long as you choose to stay."

Before he could answer her, a handsome young man, in dandy frontier costume, stepped forward and accosted him.

"You will find yourself in comfortable quarters here," said this individual. "These Apaches are a good set of people, and they act more like Christians than any white men I have seen lately."

"Who are you, my friend, and how did you come here?" asked Bill.

"My name is Dave Hillyer, and I am last from Topnotch district. I was caught in one of the freezing hurricanes that ornament the weather of this region, and it would have sent me to kingdom come if it hadn't been for my kind friends here; who found me lying stiff on the plain, and brought me in, and put me in the land of the living again, without the loss of so much as a toenail."

"It is quite likely that I owe them my life, too," replied Bill, "as I had a small chance to get away from some white devils when these red-men scooped down and cleaned out the scoundrels."

"I am told that you were in a close place," said Felipa. "My men—we used to call them warriors—killed three of Red Jack's gang down there. Do you think your Government will want to make war upon us for that?"

"It is hard to say. It is so easy for the strong to make war upon the weak."

"Yes, and such scoundrels as those are the very men who bring trouble upon us. Bad is too weak a name for them. They are worse than the meanest among the red-skins. You all hate and fear them, and say that they ought to be killed; yet, when they abuse our women and murder our men, there is an outcry raised against us if we dare to defend ourselves. Even for such a just deed as this the settlers may rise, and the Government may send soldiers against us. Well, let them come! We know how to die."

There was no answering this, as there was too much truth in it, and Bill Branch and Dave Hillyer accepted Felipa's invitation to enter her lodge and eat.

The young scout noticed her closely, and her looks and speech and manner convinced him that she could not be an Apache by birth. He ventured to question her on this point.

"I am Mexican," replied Felipa; "but there is Indian blood in my veins. I am an Apache by adoption, and my people believe in me, and they are my only friends. You are new to this country, or you would have learned more of me."

"I have heard much that is good of you," interrupted Bill.

"But I know you. You are called Bill the Blizzard, and I believe that you deserve the name. You are brave, but are not supposed to be rash, and I want to know why it is that you have been venturing again into Tenspot Gulch, where no decent white man dares to show his face any more."

"I have been in there twice before this time, and have seen no sign of danger," replied Bill.

"The pitcher that goes often to the well may be broken at last. You would have been wiped out to-day, if it had not been for my Apaches. What brought you there this time?"

"Well, I don't need to make a secret of it. I was scouting about in search of an Englishman, who had hired me to guide him in there. I brought him near the mouth of the Gulch, where we camped, and in the night some of Red Jack's rascals gobbled him up and carried him away. I knew the trail, and was looking around to find a chance to get into the hole it leads to."

"What is the Englishman's name?" asked Felipa.

"Howard Creveling."

"He is safe enough. They will not be likely to harm him. Why need you trouble yourself about him?"

"You seem to know more about the matter than I do; but perhaps you are only guessing. I want to find him because he trusted me as his guide, and I lost him; because I believe him to be a good, square man; and because a young lady in Apacheville has taken a liking to him, and wants him to be got out of the clutches of those scoundrels."

"Who is the young lady in Apacheville?"

"Marta, of the Casino. But why should I speak to you of those people. What do you know about them?"

"More than you think. I have often been in Apacheville. I go there whenever I please, as a Mexican gentleman, and no one knows me as Felipa, the Apache. I have seen you there, and I have seen Marta."

Dave Hillyer looked at both of them eagerly, and was about to speak, when an Indian came running into the lodge.

CHAPTER XVI.

SWORN PARDS.

THE man who entered the lodge had an important message, which he delivered to Felipa in Apache; but Bill Branch understood it.

It was to the effect that a number of white

men had been discovered approaching the camp, and that they were supposed to be Red Jack's people.

"Red Jack's gang!" exclaimed the Blizzard. "Count me in!"

"Me, too, if there is going to be a skirmish," said Dave Hillyer, taking in the situation at once.

Felipa sallied forth from the lodge, and gave her orders quickly and briefly, with the decision and authority of a true chief of a savage band, and the Apaches speedily spread themselves, skirmisher fashion, over the ground in front of the camp, taking cover behind rocks and in hollows, where they silently awaited the onset.

But it was not much of a fight. Indeed, there was not enough of it to make it interesting to the two white men.

A party of the marauders, coming upon the bodies of their slain comrades, and well knowing whose work it was, had probably dashed off on the trail of the Apaches, thinking to strike them before they could reach their camp.

In this they were disappointed, as the Apache camp-fire showed them that they were approaching dangerous ground, and they advanced cautiously to reconnoiter.

After the exchange of a few shots they retired more silently than they had come, and Felipa refused to permit her warriors to pursue them.

"They are a pack of cowards," she said. "They will watch to take us unawares, or to pick us off one by one; but they do not dare to meet us in fair fight. Rest in peace, my friends. We are not afraid of those dogs."

Branch and Hillyer went back to the fire that was burning under the rock, where they lighted their pipes, and sat down to enjoy a quiet smoke.

"I judge that you are the right sort," said the Blizzard. "I liked the way you chipped in and stood up for these red-skins."

"Against that scum! Of course I should do that. Besides, they saved my life."

"That's so."

"And then again, friend Blizzard," continued Dave, "I was bound to chip in when you had opened the game. I don't think I stand to lose anything when I follow your lead. I like your style, and when you spoke of Marta you touched me in a soft place."

"You have seen her then?" asked Bill, casting a jealous eye upon his comrade.

"Should say I have. What is that Englishman to her?"

"Not much, I suppose. She liked him, as he was a gentleman, and she don't often see that sort. But she seemed to know a sight about his folks and his affairs, and I can't guess how she got hold of it. That is why I went to her for the money."

"What money?"

"I wanted to raise a force of fighting men to go after the Englishman. That would cost something, and I hadn't the cash. Marta said she would raise five hundred dollars for me as soon as John Crafton came home."

"I guess she got it without waiting for him. I let her have it."

"You did?" exclaimed Bill. "What right—"

"Easy there! Don't let your angry passions rise for nothing. When did you speak to her about that money?"

Bill gave him the date.

"That very night," said Hillyer, "I tackled her at poker, and got let in to the tune of five hundred or so, and served me right. She had wonderful luck, and you are both welcome to the money. Between you and me, Bill, are you in love with that girl?"

"Between you and me, pard, I am mighty far gone."

"And how does she stand on the question?"

"That's hard to say. Sometimes I fancy that she is solid for me, and then I think it's nothing more than friendship. But I hope it's better than that."

"I asked you those questions, Bill, because I am pretty badly struck there myself. But I don't suppose that I have any sort of a chance, and we won't quarrel on that point. I want to help you find the Englishman, and perhaps you can give me a light in some business of my own."

"What is that?" inquired the Blizzard.

"The fact is, that though I hail from Topnotch, I am new to this country, and came down here on particular business. I am employed by the Iron Mountain Railroad Company, of Missouri, as a special detective, to hunt three men who robbed a train some time ago and got away with quite a pile of money and valuables. I tracked them from place to place, and had reason to believe that they had struck out for this country. I was following a blind trail when I was caught by that confounded blizzard, or norther, or whatever you call it."

Bill Branch knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and looked at his companion closely for a moment. Then he extended his hand, which the other grasped.

"You have come to the right shop," he said. "It is likely that I can put you on a plain trail. Was one of the men named Dick Clements?"

"That's my man."

"Was another Bob Risley?"

"Yes."

"And did the third go by the name of Billy Button?"

"The very men!" exclaimed Dave. "What do you know about them?"

"I have seen two of them, and have heard them talk about that same train robbery."

Bill Branch then related what he had seen and heard when he was looking for a night camp in the hills north of Apacheville, giving the substance of the conversation there between Sam Byers, Dick Clements and Bob Risley.

"Sam Byers told them," he said, in conclusion, "that a man who came near answering the description of the Billy Button they were hunting is Sile Brunton, of Apacheville; and he is a suspicious-looking sinner, sure enough. We will find Brunton in Apacheville, and if he is the man he won't be far away from the wolves who were on his trail."

"Thank you, Bill. How glad I am that I met you! I will start for Apacheville as soon as day breaks in the morning."

"So will I, and now we must turn in and get a stock of sleep ahead."

It was not daylight the next morning when the young men rolled up their blankets and saddled their horses; but there was a "feed" ready for them, and Felipa and most of the Apaches had turned out to see them off and wish them well.

Before Bill Branch mounted, Felipa stepped forward and whispered to him.

"When you want to find the Englishman," she said, "and are ready to go right through with the business, come to me."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"What do you know about the Englishman?"

"Come and see."

"All right, Felipa; I will come."

As the young men rode on together the liking they had formed for each other grew and strengthened. They were glad that they had met, and each had found in the other a friend in whom he believed he could trust and upon whom he could depend in a pinch.

"We are sworn pards now," said Dave Hillyer. "I will help you to find the Englishman and you shall go in with me to catch those train-robbers. As for Marta—"

"We're not pards there, Dave; but we mustn't let that split us."

As they reached the edge of Apacheville a man who saw them came forward to meet them, and he was greatly excited.

"You are wanted, Bill Branch, and you hain't come a bit too soon," he said.

"Who wants me?"

"Marta's took up."

"Took up? What do you mean?"

"She's been arrested for murder."

"Who's been killed?"

"Sile Brunton: and his friends and a lot of other galoots are raisin' a crowd to take her out o' jail and string her up."

The two friends looked at each other.

"We are pards in this, Dave," said the Blizzard.

"That's so, old man. Lead on!"

And they spurred into Apacheville.

CHAPTER XVII.

MARTA'S ARREST.

At an early hour in the morning the body of Sile Brunton was found where it lay in the road near the deserted shanty.

The early riser who discovered the corpse hastened to give the alarm, and the spot was immediately visited by Jordan Jeremy, justice of the peace and coroner, and by Jim Boland, the constable attached to his office.

Then a stream of "citizens at large" began to flow thither, which soon became a river, and the scene of the tragedy was overflowed.

This was not because homicides of the kind were unusual in Apacheville. Only a month or so previous to this event bodies of men who had died with their boots on had been scattered about the streets pretty freely. But it had been quite two weeks since a man had died any other than a natural death there, and Sile Brunton's sudden taking off was something novel and refreshing.

More than this—the main cause of the excitement was the talk that was immediately started concerning Marta of the Casino. It was remarkable how suspicion sought her out and settled on her, and that suspicion became a certainty when the pistol that was discovered near the body was recognized as hers. One of its chambers had been discharged, and the hole in the dead man's head was a small one, such as might have been made by a bullet from that pistol.

Nothing else was found near the body, and no other suspicious circumstances came to light. There was a little money in Sile Brunton's pockets—a few bills and some silver—and it was not supposed that the murder had been accompanied by robbery.

People were quick to speak of the antagonism that had existed between Marta and the dead man. There were plenty who knew of his persecutions, the contempt with which she had treated him, the sharp words she had given him,

and the threats she had openly made against him on at least two occasions.

This state of facts, coupled with the finding of Marta's pistol, was enough for Jordan Jeremy, even if popular opinion had not pushed him forward to his duty.

As soon as he had examined the body in his capacity of coroner, he took his constable and marched to Mr. Crafton's house in his capacity of justice of the peace, to arrest Marta. The crowd, resolving itself into a special posse, followed him.

A loud knocking at the door speedily caused Marta to thrust her head out of an upper window.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "Mr. Crafton is not at home."

"We don't want Mr. Crafton," replied Jeremy. "We want you."

"Want me? What do you want of me?"

"I am sorry to say, Miss Marta, that I've got to arrest you."

"Mercy on us! What have I been doing?"

"Do you know that Sile Brunton is dead?"

"Sile Brunton dead? No. Is it a fact?"

"True as gospel, miss. He is lyin' down here a little way, as dead as a smoked herring, and it looks as if you had killed him. Will you come down, or shall we bu'st open the door?"

"I will come right down as soon as I can dress."

"Honor bright, now?"

"Honor bright."

The crowd surrounded the house, so that the accused should have no chance to escape, and restrained their impatience until Marta came down and opened the door.

"I hope this is not a joke you are trying to play on me," she said. "If it is, some of you shall suffer for it."

"It ain't no sort of a joke, miss," replied Jeremy. "I wish it was. You know that I'm a justice of the peace, and it's my duty to arrest you for the murder of Sile Brunton."

"That is nonsense, Mr. Jeremy. No doubt the man needed killing; but I have never harmed a hair of his head."

"I hope that's a fact; but it don't look that way. Where's your pistol?"

Marta was confused by this question, and many eager eyes noticed her confusion.

"My pistol?" she replied. "Oh, I must have forgotten it last night, and left it at the Casino."

"You didn't forget it, miss. You left it somewhere else. Is this the article?"

"Yes, that is my pistol."

"No doubt o' that. It was picked up near the dead man. One cartridge is missin', and he's got a hole in his head. Puttin' this and that together, miss, you'll have to go along with me. We're goin' to have an inquest."

Sile Brunton's body, when the posse reached it, was closely watched to see if blood would start from the wound in the presence of the murderer; but corpses have a disappointing way of not meeting public expectation in that matter, and nothing of the sort was visible.

It was an unpleasant sight, and Marta shuddered as she looked at it, and passed on.

Jordan Jeremy directed the corpse to be taken to his office, where he speedily organized a coroner's jury in legal and proper style. It was his intention to hold an inquest as coroner, and in the same proceeding to act as committing magistrate, which was quite an economical piece of business and worthy of imitation.

The news had spread rapidly, and the little room was uncomfortably crowded when the inquest began.

Nelson Forbes, a mine-owner, who had practiced law elsewhere, volunteered to appear for Marta, and she gladly accepted his aid, as she perceived that the situation was getting to be serious. She did not know where John Crafton was to be found, but gave directions that he should be informed of her position as soon as he appeared in Apacheville.

The evidence was brief, but told sharply against the accused girl.

The early-riser deposed to the finding of the body, and Jim Boland and others described the condition in which it had been found, and produced the pistol that was discovered near it. The usual medical man testified to the cause of death, and was decidedly of the opinion that it could not have been a case of suicide.

Then came the evidence that more closely connected Marta with the murder—evidence of motive and of threats.

Sile Brunton's attentions to her had been open and bold, and the vehement manner in which she repulsed them was notorious. The scene in the Casino, when he had demanded a kiss from her and had been knocked down by Howard Creveling, was described, and her declaration that she would shoot him if he ever again came within ten steps of her, was repeated with telling effect. Also, that second scene, when the drunken brute had forced himself upon her, and she had again threatened him.

All this told against her, and it was easy for her to read the unspoken verdict of public opinion, which declared her to be guilty.

When the evidence was all in Marta was told

Bill, the Blizzard.

that she might make a statement if she chose to do so. At the same time she was duly informed of her rights in that respect, and was cautioned to say nothing that might tend to criminate her.

She chose to make a statement.

"I have nothing to conceal," she said. "I am willing to tell you all I know about Sile Brunton, and to say just when and where and how I last saw him."

"I know nothing good of the man, and I doubt if any of you do. If he has killed himself, as I am inclined to believe he has, perhaps it was the best use he could make of himself. I never liked him, and I had good cause to dislike him. He was a nuisance to me, as you have been told, and more than once he came as near to frightening me as I would care to have a man come."

"After the scene at the Casino last night, which has been told to you straight enough, I started to go home as usual, but about an hour earlier than my usual time. I had no idea of meeting Sile Brunton on the way. If I had thought about the matter at all, I would have thought that he was too drunk to bother me any more that night."

"When I was just below that old shanty, near the place where his body was found, a man started out from behind a rock and I saw that it was Sile Brunton."

"He called me by name, and came out into the road to stop me; but he was too unsteady on his legs for that, and he stumbled and fell."

"Before he could pick himself up I had made a quick circle around him, and then I ran home as fast as I could go, got into the house, and locked and bolted the door."

"When I had struck a light I missed my pistol. I thought it possible that it had slipped out while running, but was not sure that I had brought it away from the Casino. Anyhow, it was not worth while to go out and look for it and run the risk of meeting that man again. So I fastened up the house as well as I could, and went to bed."

"That is all I know about the matter. I do not know how my pistol happened to be where it was found, and can only guess that I dropped it when I started to run. I do not know how one of the chambers came to be discharged. They were all full of cartridges when I last saw the pistol."

"I had nothing to do with the death of Sile Brunton, and am as innocent of his murder as any of you are. I have told you the straight truth, and have no fear of the result."

Marta's story was admitted to be a plausible one, but not sufficiently so to overcome the evidence against her.

"Puttin' this and that together," said Coroner Jeremy to his jury, "I don't see any chance to get rid of the fact that the man was killed, and the odds are heavy that Miss Marta killed him."

The jury quickly rendered a verdict to that effect, and Justice Jeremy, acting as magistrate, ordered that the prisoner be taken to jail to await the action of higher authorities.

So Marta missed her breakfast and got her dinner in jail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LYNCH LAW.

It was undoubtedly the general sentiment of Apacheville, shared equally by high and low, that Marta had killed Sile Brunton, and that it was quite likely that he deserved killing.

Whether the killing was murder would be for a jury to decide, and it was possible that a jury might be largely influenced by the double fact that Marta was a woman and Brunton was a brute.

But there was a sentiment opposed to the regular course of the law, which was shared by few at first, but began to grow rapidly, and it favored a shorter and sharper way of settling the question.

It may as well be stated here, not to make any mystery of the matter, that this sentiment was largely worked up, if it was not originated, by Sam Byers and Dick Clements and Bob Risley, who may be supposed to have had reasons of their own for "taking a hand in the game."

They had more material to work on than an outsider would have thought they had.

Sile Brunton had not lacked for friends in Apacheville, as he was not only a man of money, but the boon companion of all the rowdies and roughs in town, and he had quite an extensive set of his own, among the very men who would be likely to seize upon his death as an occasion for public commotion.

Another element of excitement was the discovery of the fact, made known before the inquest was ended, that Sile Brunton had left a will, and it was such a remarkable will that it was calculated to give him far more popularity after his death than he had ever enjoyed in his lifetime.

It was in possession of his mine partner, who was not slow to disclose its contents.

Brunton had left all his property to the city, with the exception of a good balance in bank, which was to be employed in furnishing, at all the saloons in Apacheville, unlimited free drinks

to all who should apply for them on the day of his burial.

The man had doubtless expected to die a sudden and violent death, and had intended that the event should become a sensation.

With this capital to bank on, it was no difficult matter to raise a mob against Marta.

The conspirators began their work as soon as she was arrested.

Before she reached Coroner Jeremy's office it was whispered about that the matter ought to be settled then and there, and several persons in the crowd raised their voices in favor of lynch law.

But those demonstrations were not favorably received at the time, and the accused was safely lodged in jail.

Her enemies were not idle during the inquest. Talk against her became general in certain quarters and among a certain class, and it was greatly increased by the knowledge of Sile Brunton's remarkable will.

The dead man, it was said, had been one of the solid citizens of Apacheville, and was known as one of the most liberal, generous, whole-souled fellows that ever lived. This was proved by his extraordinary generosity in leaving his money to the city, and by his unexampled liberality in providing free drinks for everybody on the day of his burial, "and he not a candidate for anything!"

That popular and public-spirited citizen had been secretly struck down—foully murdered at the dead hour of night—and the chances were that the murderer would go free unless something was done. The law was too slow and too uncertain, and she would escape. Some tender-hearted jury would turn her loose, or John Crafton, who was a rich man, would buy her off.

There was no doubt of her guilt—not a shadow of doubt, and the community ought to make sure that the murder of such a fine fellow as Sile Brunton was avenged.

Among such a population as that of Apacheville, which had of late been largely increased in its worst elements by the sudden "petering out" of the Topnotch district, such an excitement grew and spread very rapidly. There were plenty of men on hand who were glad of a chance to raise any kind of a row, hoping that in the confusion they would find opportunities of plunder and of settling old scores.

When night came on there was a big mob ready for action, and it was a pretty well organized mob, too, controlled by men who knew how to take advantage of popular commotion and direct it to their own purposes.

It must be confessed that the Apacheville jail was more for show than for use, and at the same time it was not a bit ornamental. It was only a shanty, reinforced by an inner wall of thick planks, which did not offer much of an obstacle to a prisoner determined upon escaping. It would hold a vagrant who was too lazy, or a tramp who was too drunk to get out, but could not be relied on to detain a man who made up his mind to leave it. Consequently dangerous criminals had been kept under guard, except when they were called for by Vigilance Committees, to whom they were usually given up without much ado.

But Marta was not considered a dangerous criminal. It was not supposed that she would attempt to escape. If she should make an attempt, it was not likely that she would succeed. If she should succeed, it would be easy to catch her. Nor did it enter the heads of the authorities that a Vigilance Committee would be apt to call for her.

Therefore she was not confined to the comparatively strong main room of the jail, but was comfortably lodged in an apartment on the upper floor, next to those occupied by the jailor and his wife.

When that mob put itself in motion to march to the jail, the authorities were naturally caught napping, but not entirely so. The talk against Marta had been so open, that the result of it could not be secret, and news of the intended movement was widely spread shortly after it was determined on.

The head of the mob, when it reached the jail, found itself confronted by Jordan Jeremy, indignant that the majesty of the law should be defied in his person, and by Constable Jim Boland. These two were quickly joined by Sheriff Nevins, by Mayor Hornby, and by Nelson Forbes, who had just come down from upstairs, where he had been consulting with Marta as her counsel.

"What does this mean?" demanded Jeremy. "What do you want here?"

"You know well enough what we are after," replied the leader of the mob. "We want the woman who murdered Sile Brunton, and we mean to have her, too."

"What! You wouldn't lynch a woman, would you? That would never do."

"We don't mean to let the lawyers and the rest of you turn her loose."

"No danger of that. Not a bit. Hello, Hornby! Glad to see you here. You must say something to this crowd, or do something, somehow."

The mayor was quite willing to do all he

could; but he was flustered, and did not know how to begin. It seemed to him that a speech would be the proper thing, and he cleared his voice and started in.

"Disperse, ye—no, that's too much like the battle of Lexington. If you don't clear out, I will proceed to read the riot act. Say, Jeremy, have you got a copy of the riot act?"

"Don't know anything about any riot act," replied Jeremy.

"It's too dark to read, anyhow. Fellow-citizens, listen to me! If you try to buck against the law, somebody will get hurt. You don't get that woman or anybody else out of this jail while our heads are hot, and that's the words with the bark on 'em."

"Dry up that foolishness!" exclaimed the leader of the mob. "We don't want to hurt you folks; but you had better leak out afore you git hurt. We are goin' right in to git that woman."

Nelson Forbes stood at the door, with his back against it, and a pistol in his hand.

"It will be death to some of you if you try it," he said. "You will have to pass over my dead body to get in here."

"None o' your blow, Nelse Forbes!" shouted a man in the crowd. "You're paid to turn that crittur loose; but you don't play no gum games over us."

Sheriff Nevins ranged himself by the side of Forbes.

"What he says, I stand to," remarked the sheriff, who was a man of few words.

This brought the business to a crisis. The leader of the mob looked around to make sure of his backing, and there could be no doubt of that. The crowd was excited and determined, and the men at the rear pressed forward those in front. Four resolute men, with the law on their side, might do much; but there was doubt of the firmness of the mayor and Jeremy, and the mob was a big one.

Pistols were drawn, and the would-be lynchers advanced threateningly, when the attention of all was attracted by the clattering of hoofs.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SQUADRON OF CAVALRY.

Two horsemen galloped up to the jail, pushing through the mob without ceremony.

One of them was known to all as Bill the Blizzard, and his companion, Dave Hillyer, was recognized by a few as the dandy sport from Topnotech.

Without a word of explanation or apology, and without heeding the oaths and threats that greeted them, they pushed through the throng until they reached the front of the jail. Then their quick eyes took in the situation at once.

"Here is a squadron of cavalry for you," said Hillyer, as he halted near the mayor.

Then he began a series of maneuvers with his horse, which, though apparently proceeding from the horse's restless disposition, were in reality managed with consummate skill by the rider.

At one moment the fine animal would back into the crowd, scattering them out of his way. Then he would turn suddenly, scattering them again. Then he would rear up, and again plunge forward, seeming to be possessed by a spirit of excitement that could not be checked.

His rider appeared to be endeavoring to control him by voice and rein, while he was in fact urging him to greater extravagances.

"Shoot him! Shoot the horse!" was shouted from the crowd.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Hillyer. "Be quiet, Charley! Can't you see that I am doing my best to keep the horse still?"

"It's a lie!" exclaimed the man who had acted as spokesman of the mob. "He is doing his best to make the beast cut those capers. Stand aside, boys, and let me settle that horse."

"If you shoot that horse, I will shoot you."

It was Bill Branch who spoke. He had drawn a revolver, and sat erect on his horse, facing the mob.

Crack! went the leader's pistol, and Dave Hillyer's horse fell. But at the same instant the man who had shot him dropped in his tracks, as the unerring aim of the Blizzard sent a bullet spinning through his brain.

As quick as thought Hillyer was crouched behind the fallen horse, and Branch was standing behind the live one, each with two revolvers ready for action. The other four defenders of the jail were at their backs.

"Come on if you want to!" shouted the Blizzard. "Here we are, and we mean business."

If the mob meant business, that was the time to show it; but they hesitated. They had been disorganized by the maneuvers of Dave Hillyer and his horse. To separate and scatter them was to weaken their power of sticking together. Then their leader had fallen, and no person was in a hurry to step forward and take his place. They knew what Bill the Blizzard could do with his pistols, and it was clear to them that the defenders of the jail "meant business."

The sudden arrival of nearly a dozen armed and determined men, who had come to support the side of law and order, settled their movements, and the mob melted away, carrying off the body of their late leader.

"That was an easier job than I thought it would be," remarked the Blizzard. "But I am sorry, Dave, that your horse was killed."

"So am I. I was fond of Charley. But he did good service, and horses are plenty."

The two friends were congratulated upon their opportune arrival and effective action, and they went to get a few hours' sleep, after Sheriff Nevins had promised that the jail should be well guarded during the remainder of the night.

In the morning they sallied forth to view the face of affairs and consult with Nelson Forbes.

A brief inspection of the town satisfied them that it would not be advisable for them to circulate very freely in Apacheville just then, unless they wished to provoke a collision at every step they took, and that was far from their desire.

It was the day set for the burial of Sile Brunton, whose remarkable will was already bearing fruit abundantly. The free-drinks clause had been carried into effect by his mine partner at an early hour, and many were the thirsty souls who were on hand at the first to take advantage of it. Sile Brunton's popularity rose rapidly from summer heat to fever heat, and then to the boiling point and was in a fair way to become superheated and burst the bulb.

The two partners avoided the places where the memory of Sile Brunton was cherished in all manner of mixed and plain drinks, and had their consultation with Nelson Forbes, who accompanied them to the jail, where after some negotiation they secured a brief interview with Marta.

Then they sought a quiet spot, to compare their impressions and decide upon the course they should pursue.

"It seems to me," said Dave, "that Marta is clearly innocent of that shooting."

"Of course she is," exclaimed Bill. "Didn't she say so?"

"Yes, but outside of her statement the evidence is strong in her favor. She surprised those train robbers and Sam Byers when they were trying to force money from Brunton."

"That is only her statement," remarked Branch.

"Come, now, Bill; don't be too peculiar. I believe in her innocence and in her word just as strongly as you do; but I am considering the evidence in the shape it would be likely to take before a jury. We know that the statement was true, because she gave such a good description of the scoundrels that we both recognized them. There is another strong point, which you may not have noticed."

"What is that?"

"There was very little money found in Sile Brunton's pockets; but it is certain that he had been winning heavily at one game and another, and that his pockets were full of money just before he started for home. Nobody would pretend to say that Marta had killed him for his money; yet he had been robbed by whoever killed him."

"It is easy to tell what that points to," said the Blizzard.

"Of course it is. When Marta had run away from him, he fell into the hands of his old pals. They found him as obstinate as ever, I suppose, and the only way they could get even with him was by making an end of him. Then they naturally went through his pockets, and they must have made a pretty good haul."

"How about Marta's pistol?"

"They found it there, and discharged one of the cartridges. Perhaps they killed Brunton with it. Perhaps they thought they saw a good chance to cover their tracks. I am quite sure that they killed the man, and we must get hold of them."

"I don't believe they have left Apacheville," suggested Bill Branch.

"No more do I. It looks as if they are taking a hand in the game that is being played against Marta. If they thought they could clear their skirts by hanging her, they are not the men to hesitate. It wouldn't pay us to make any move against them just yet. They are the cocks of the walk just now. But they must know that Marta will tell the story of what she saw in the old shanty, and as soon as the excitement is over they will make themselves scarce. Then I will have to take up their trail again."

"I can make a good guess at the end of the trail, Dave."

"What is your guess?"

"It is almost a dead certainty. They will bring up in Red Jack's band, as sure as water will run down hill."

"I suppose so. And that brings us to the Englishman again."

"Yes, everything seems to circle around the Englishman. But we can't look him up until we are sure that Marta is safe."

"That's business, Bill. Marta's safety is the first thing to be attended to. The crowd that was scattered last night won't let the thing drop there."

"Indeed they won't. They will have full swing to-day, and when night comes there won't be enough square men to guard that jail."

"So we must act, and act quickly."

"That's what I mean to do, for one, and I mean to make a sure thing of it, too."

CHAPTER XX.

SILE BRUNTON'S DAY.

The day that was set for the burial of Sile Brunton was a day long to be remembered in Apacheville.

All the saloons kept open house all day to all comers, and everybody was welcome to as many drinks as he chose to call for, regardless of his capacity for carrying them, and without being compelled to pay for the privilege of poisoning himself.

At an early hour in the morning the bar-rooms were overrun, and extra help had to be employed to accommodate the never-ceasing stream of thirsty customers.

Men drank who hardly ever drank before, And those who always drank then drank the more.

The tramp, the bummer, the lunch-grabber, and the dead-broke prospector, were for that day on a par with the speculator, the banker, the mine-owner, even with the saloon-keeper, and each and every one of them stood upon his rights under Sile Brunton's will, and made the most of his privileges, without giving a thought to the probable condition of his head the next morning.

There was such a run on champagne by those who had never before tasted that effervescent beverage, that the visible supply in Apacheville was soon cleared out. All fancy drinks suffered in proportion, and more than one saloon was compelled to close its doors because its stock of liquors was entirely exhausted.

Pandemonium was the necessary result. No person in Apacheville had ever seen such a sight before, and all respectable people hoped that they might never look upon its like again.

Bar-room brawls and fights and street rows were such common occurrences that peaceable citizens closed their doors, and by noon there was not an establishment open except the saloons; but they formed a large portion of Apacheville. Shouts and oaths and yells and the merry notes of the pistol were the only music that enlivened the great Sile Brunton circus.

The authorities were of course powerless in this pandemonium. The few policemen that Apacheville afforded were of no more use than straws in a whirlwind. The law-breakers were largely in the majority, and the only chance for quiet people was to keep out of their way.

Numbers of strangers, as has been said, had flocked into Apacheville, and most of them were roughs and rowdies from the Topnotch district, who were ripe for any kind of disturbance. Nobody cared much what they did to each other; but men of property saw their interests seriously imperiled, and the question was whether the crazy crowd would take advantage of the circumstances to start a general plundering spree.

Sheriff Nevins and his deputies, and Mayor Hornby and his police, with a committee of citizens, secretly organized and armed a small but determined force, who were to meet the mob and fight them to the last extremity, if they should be seized by the plundering fever. But this force was kept out of the way, and was not to be called on except in case of the most pressing emergency.

Bill the Blizzard and Dave Hillyer were not enrolled in the force. They had plenty of work of their own to attend to.

The funeral of Sile Brunton cut a small figure in the disorder of the day which he had appointed as his own. His body was attended to the grave by his mine partner and a small, half-drunken crowd; but most of his admirers preferred to stick to the bar-rooms and drink to his memory.

But they did not forget the fact that he had been killed, or the woman who was accused of murdering him. There were men among them who knew how to guide such public opinion as was afloat there, and to turn it into the channel that suited their private purposes.

So all the drinking and talking and quarreling and plotting tended to bring up Marta's case, and all the passions of the mob were directed to the point of atoning for the failure of the night before.

If there was to be a general row, it would begin with an attack on the jail. If Apacheville was to be plundered, the lynching of Marta would start the wild work.

The police were not entirely inactive. One arrest was made; but it was quietly done, and the subject was too insignificant a person to cause any excitement.

He was a stranger, a vagrant of the lowest type, dirty, in rags, and with a very rough assortment of hair and beard. He did not appear to have any friends, and nobody desired to make his acquaintance; but he was always ready to take a drink, and was one of the noisiest of the howlers for vengeance on Sile Brunton's murderer.

This individual passed through the day without being killed or knocked down. He took no notice of snubs or insults, was submissive under curses and kicks, and was always to be found on the popular side of every question.

But in the early evening he came to grief.

Staggering along alone, evidently under

heavy a load as he could carry, he came upon a policeman who was sneaking near the side of a house, only anxious to keep out of a difficulty.

This policeman he regarded as his lawful prey, and pounced upon him at once; but he caught a Tartar, and was triumphantly arrested and borne away.

Having no friends, he was easily brought to Justice Jeremy's office, where he gave the name of John Smith. Jeremy ordered him to be put in "the cooler" to get sober, and to be brought up for punishment in the morning.

"The cooler" was the main room of the jail, directly under the apartment assigned to Marta. There was no other occupant when John Smith was thrust in, and he fell on the floor, looking more like a bundle of rags than a man.

"No more bother with him to-night," said the jailer, as he locked the door and went away.

Before the sounds of the steps died away, John Smith had risen to his feet—a tall, active, sober man.

From some recess of his ragged garments he produced a candle, which he lighted with a match. Then he tore off a rag, and stuffed it into the keyhole. Then he brought out a very fine and sharp saw.

Mounting on a stool, he began operations with his saw, and in a few moments cut out a piece of plank from the ceiling.

There was another thickness of plank above, and against this he tapped lightly.

"Who is there?" was the response, in the voice of Marta.

"It is I, Bill Branch. Get ready, and I will soon have a hole made to let you out."

He then attacked the side of the house, where he made a hole large enough for the passage of his body. Then the flooring of the upper room had to suffer, and another piece of plank was taken out.

"All right," he whispered, and down through the hole came Marta, looking not a bit like Marta, as she was dressed in a suit of boy's clothes.

He helped her to descend, and silently deposited her on the floor.

"Is it really you, Bill?" she asked. "How horrid you do look!"

"Never mind my looks, Marta, but get out of here with as little noise as possible."

She crawled out through the hole in the side of the house, and he extinguished his candle and followed her.

They debouched into a narrow and dark alley, between the jail and another frame building, and down the alley they passed to a stable, where they found Dave Hillyer waiting for them with two horses.

It was but a little after ten o'clock at night when the mob came howling to the jail.

Sile Brunton's whisky had done its work, and his friends had determined that his day should have an appropriate ending.

The mob was furious in its mood, desperate in its design, and overwhelming in its strength.

Guards had been placed at the jail by Sheriff Nevins; but one look at the crowd was enough for them, and they "weakened." Bill Branch and Dave Hillyer were no longer there to aid and inspirit them, and they stole away, leaving the mob in undisputed possession.

The jailer, after a faint attempt at remonstrance, surrendered his keys, and also stole away.

Up-stairs surged the mob, and rushed into the room that had been occupied by Marta, only to find it empty of everything but its usual furniture.

They at once saw the hole in the floor, and soon connected it with the hole in the wall of the lower room. The bird had fled, and their cruel scheme was thwarted.

Frantic in their rage and disappointment they half-demolished the jail, denounced the authorities as privy to her escape, and sallied forth into the street looking for victims to wreak their vengeance upon.

That night was a night of terror for Apacheville, and there was good cause for marking Sile Brunton's day with a black stone.

While the mob was gutting the jail, three persons were riding at a brisk pace over the plain west of Apacheville. They seemed to be two men and a boy; but the boy was Marta.

"I do think, Bill Branch," she was saying, "that I never saw a more frightful object than you are. Those ragged clothes, and the beard, have made you a perfect monster."

"Do you feel like bragging about your own looks?" replied the Blizzard, with a glance at her attire.

"Oh! that's nothing. This is good enough for Marta of the Casino, and I have a bundle of my own things that I shed in that jail."

"So has Dave a bundle of mine in his saddle-bags, and I know where there is plenty of water."

"I hope we will soon reach it. Where are we going to?"

"Where you will be safe."

A little while before daylight Sam Byers, Dick Clements and Bob Hillyer were together in a gully outside of the town. They had thre

horses which they had stolen, and that was not the only stolen property in their possession.

"It's best for all three of us to light out of this," said Byers.

The two others coincided with his opinion, and wanted to know what refuge they should seek.

"All you've got to do is to follow me," replied Byers, "and I'll take you where you'll be safe and snug, and where there's chances for plenty of good specs, too."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MONOGRAM.

HOWARD CREVELING'S confinement daily grew more irksome to him.

The mysterious voices in the cavern had caused him to break off his negotiations with John Wilson. When the injunction, "Swear to no lie!" had been twice uttered, and when a careful search had been made without finding any person from whom the voice might have proceeded, he refused to sign the certificate which Wilson wished to send to England, and insisted upon his immediate release.

"What do you mean?" demanded Wilson. "That was a strange thing that happened just now; but I supposed you were too much of a man to be frightened by such a trifle."

"I am not frightened," replied Mr. Creveling; "but this does not seem to me to be a trifle. Can you guess where that voice came from?"

"That is too hard a conundrum for me. It must be a trick that somebody has been playing on me. But none of my men were near us."

"Your men, as you call these outlaws, have nothing to do with it. That was not a man's voice."

"It did sound like a woman's voice, and that is what makes the matter look so queer. But there is such a thing as ventriloquism, and a ventriloquist can disguise his voice."

"That won't do, John Wilson. You said that none of your men were near us. If nobody could hear what we were saying, how could anybody speak so pat just at that moment? It was the voice of a woman, dead or alive. Perhaps it was the spirit of my brother Arthur's wife."

Wilson shuddered and turned pale, but recovered himself instantly.

"You are superstitious," he said, with a sneer. "Do you really refuse to accept the terms I offered you?"

"I do. I am not satisfied."

"Even when I am ready to swear that the boy is your nephew?"

"Swear to no lie, John Wilson!"

"So you have caught that up, as pert as a parrot. I see how it is; you want Balcombe for yourself."

"I do not mean to be a party to a scheme for settling a spurious heir upon the property."

"Well, I will leave you to your reflections for a while. If you don't get tired of your stupid obstinacy I miss my guess."

Howard Creveling was then left alone—and very much alone. In fact, he was a close prisoner, and was made to feel the rigors of imprisonment.

In the course of his captivity he had got into the habit of handling the ring that Marta had given him. He had never taken it from the finger on which she had placed it, but would sit and turn it around, and even this employment helped him to beguile the weary hours.

He had never examined it, except to notice that it was a solid gold ring, with an old-fashioned stone in a heavy setting.

In his solitary confinement he took it off and looked at it closely. On the inside he saw an inscription.

He took it to the light, and clearly made out the letters "A. C." entwined together.

That inscription was well known to him. It was the monogram of his brother, Arthur Creveling.

The Englishman was more than astonished; he was mystified. This was not the first mystification that had been forced upon him in that strange country; but it was one more mystification.

How had the girl come into possession of that ring? She evidently did not know its history, and had no sentimental attachment to it, or she would not have parted with it so readily.

Perhaps it had been given to her by Bill Branch. If so, the Blizzard could not have regarded it as possessing a special value as a family relic.

A theory had shaped itself in Mr. Creveling's mind, to the effect that the young man known as Bill Branch was in reality his nephew, and that John Wilson was seeking to palm off his own son as the heir of Balcombe.

He was certain that the young man who had been shown to him in the cavern as his nephew did not have a single Creveling feature; while he fancied that he could detect in Bill Branch a resemblance to his brother, and was sure that he was the sort of young man whom he would readily accept as the heir.

This theory, and no other, would account for the impunity with which the Blizzard had visited Teuspot Gulch, when it was a reputed fact that no other stranger could enter it and live.

Though John Wilson was keeping him in ignorance of his rights, and was seeking to cheat him out of his just dues, he was unwilling that he should suffer any injury to his person.

Mr. Creveling naturally connected the ring with this theory, and inferred that it had come to Marta from Bill Branch. As it was possible that John Wilson might recognize it while it was in his possession, and take it from him, he concealed it in an inner pocket of his vest.

The next event of interest occurred after the close of the day on which he had discovered his brother's monogram.

Most of Red Jack's band seemed to be absent, and the cavern had been unusually quiet for some time. But at night there was a great irruption of men, who came pouring in across the lake, and they appeared to be highly excited.

The talk was so loud that Mr. Creveling could hear the greater part of it.

"What's up?" demanded John Wilson.

"It's up!" replied one of the men. "Big Ben, Rusty Jack and little Tibbets are wiped out."

"Wiped out! What has happened?"

"They were out buntin' Bill the Blizzard, and they found him—found him a leetle too easy and a leetle too much of him. Found somebody else, too. As we was ridin' in toward the Gulch we come across the three corpses, stretched out on the trail, and all skulped."

"There must have been Indians about, then?"

"We knowed that. It was Injuns' work, in course. Plenty of boss-tracks and Apache signs, and a plain trail up into the hills. We put out on the trail hot foot, thinkin' we might ketch up and settle the bill, but they had reached that camp afore we got nigh 'em, and we saw that they war too much fur us. So we turned tail and come in."

"That was right," said Red Jack. "I am sorry to hear of the death of three good men; but we can gain nothing by fighting Conejo's Apaches."

"I don't take a powerful sight o' stock in that talk," remarked Bob Burrage, who had been the spokesman of the party. "I reckon that if they don't quit pesterin' us it'll be our duty, as white men and Christians, to wipe 'em out."

"That would be the worst game we could play, Bob. There is no plunder to be got out of them, and it would be folly to fight for anything else. We would only throw away some good lives, and get nothing at all to pay for them."

"That may be your notion, Cap, but it ain't ours. We owe those cussed red-skins more'n one grudge, and the debt's got to be paid somehow."

"Better think it over, Bob, and sleep on it."

"All right; but we won't forgit it, all the same."

This episode was not particularly interesting to Mr. Creveling, except as it led him to believe that Red Jack's influence in the band showed signs of weakening; but another event soon aroused him, and made him more anxious to regain his freedom.

John Wilson had visited him, to repeat the offer of terms upon which he could have his liberty, when a man who had just come from Apacheville burst in upon them.

"What do you want here?" demanded Red Jack.

"No harin done, Cap, I reckon," replied the new-comer. "I jest looked in to say that that's the deuce to pay up to 'Pacheville."

"What is the matter there?"

"It's all along of Sila Brunton. He's dead."

"Well, not much loss in that."

"But he's been murdered, as they call it—died with his boots on, in the street at night, with a neat little bullet-hole in his head."

"That is not at all surprising. He has been for some time a candidate for a bullet-hole. What is the fuss about?"

"They say it was a woman that killed him, and they've took her up and put her in jail, and when I left that his friends war hot fur takin' her out and hangin' her."

"His friends? I never supposed he had any friends. Who is the woman?"

"Marta, who keeps the Casino."

"Marta!"

The old man jumped up, and even the Englishman was excited.

"It is impossible!" exclaimed Wilson. "Marta could never have been guilty of such a deed."

"Well, Cap, it seems like they've got the dead-wood on her. She had threatened him a plenty, and her pistol was found nigh whar he lay."

The news-bearer then proceeded to tell the whole story, as far as it was known when he left Apacheville, and his two hearers were deeply interested.

"I must go up to Apacheville at once," said Wilson, turning to the Englishman. "I must see Marta and get her out of that scrape."

"Why so?" asked Mr. Creveling. "What is Marta to you?"

"She is the daughter of a friend of mine."

"Let me go with you, John Wilson."

"You shall do nothing of the kind. You don't get out of here until you come to terms."

"For God's sake, let me go! If that girl is in trouble, I want to help her."

"What could you do?"

"She may need money."

"If she should, I have plenty—more than you could show. There is only one way for you to leave this place, Howard Creveling."

CHAPTER XXII.

THREE RECRUITS.

WHEN John Wilson returned from Apacheville, he was kind enough to visit his prisoner and give him the news he had brought.

"I could do nothing for Marta," he said.

"What! You don't mean to say that they have killed her?"

"No; but she did all that was needed to be done, herself, or had other friends to help her. I am afraid that she would have been lynched, if she had not escaped."

"How did she escape?"

"That is something which I can only guess at. She must have had help, of course. Bill the Blizzard was in town the night before, with a friend of his named Hillyer, and they were not seen around there after the girl disappeared, and I judge that they had a hand in getting her away."

"She is with Branch, then, and is safe."

"I suppose so; but that does not clear her, and she must be cleared. Why do you take such an interest in that girl, Mr. Creveling?"

"I met her at the Casino, as I told you, and she had a mysterious knowledge of me and my affairs, and her beauty and intelligence and position interested me greatly."

"Hum. Well, Mr. Creveling, you will hardly be able to follow up the acquaintance until you get out of here, and you can only get out on my terms. Are you ready to accept them?"

"No, and I never will be. I do not believe that the lad you showed me is my brother's son, and nothing can force me to admit it."

"I am sorry that you are so unreasonable; but, if you persist in your obstinacy, I will be obliged to keep you here until you come to your senses."

"You had better not carry this thing too far, John Wilson. You cannot keep me here, always, and I will find a way to make you suffer for what you have done to me."

"Nonsense! You might as well threaten these rocks. Here you shall stay until you come to my terms and make the matter sure and fast."

Mr. Creveling's reply was interrupted by the entrance of one of the cutlaws, who told Red Jack that he was wanted outside, and he went to respond to the summons.

He was informed that there were three men across the lake, who had come to the cavern for the purpose of joining the gang.

"Who are they?" he asked.

One of them was Sam Byers, who had left the band some time ago, and wanted to come back. The other two were friends of his, for whom he vouched.

"I don't want to have anything more to do with Sam Byers," said Red Jack. "I never liked the man, and when he left us I hoped we had seen the last of him. I don't suppose his friends are any better than he is."

On this point the old man had a decided opinion of his own; but he soon discovered that his comrades did not share that opinion. It was received at first with murmurs, and then with protests.

"Reckon you'd better think twice, Cap, afore you speak up so sharp," remarked Bob Burrage. "Most of us thought Sam Byers to be a good feller—a squar' man, a heavy fighter, and keen on the trail. We've jest had three good men wiped out, and we ort to be glad that three hav come forrad to take thar places. That's the opeenyon of the boys, you'll find."

It evidently was their opinion, and they expressed it freely, but with a fair amount of respect for their leader.

Red Jack was troubled. He greatly disliked Sam Byers, and his dislike had caused him to make things disagreeable for that individual until he quit the band. Now Byers had come back, and Wilson's dislike to him had returned in greater force.

But what was he to do? He had perceived of late that his influence with the band was weakening, and he had had disputes with some of them, led by Bob Burrage, which might have ended in open revolt if he had not temporized or yielded.

He could not afford to have a rupture just then, and thought it best to yield as gracefully as he could, though the accession of Byers would strengthen the ranks of his opponents in the band.

"Well, boys, you must suit yourselves," he said. "I only give my opinion of the man, and don't want to tell you what to do. That is for you to decide. To settle the question, I will put it to a vote."

He did put it to a vote, and the decision was almost unanimous in favor of admitting the strangers.

The friends who had come with Sam Byers were Dick Clements and Bob Risley, and they were brought across the lake and introduced

into the cavern, where they were cordially welcomed by all but the leader.

There was no form of initiation to the band, and no oath was expected from those who desired to join it; but there had been a custom, which Red Jack resurrected for the benefit of the new arrivals.

"Before these men can be received as comrades and entitled to share equally with the rest of us," he said, "they must show what they can do, and must do something to pay their way."

There could be no doubt that this was the custom, and it was explained to the new-comers.

"I reckon I and my pards can fix that easy enough," said Sam Byers; "but we will have to go back to Apacheville to do it. We know of a safe we can crack, and it is like to bring such a pile as you fellers hain't seen in some time, or I miss my guess."

"What safe is it?" eagerly asked Red Jack.

"It belongs to an old chap named John Crafton, and I allow he keeps it tol'able full. It's in a handy place to crack, and he's away from town a heap, leavin' his house all alone."

The leader put his hand to his face as he changed color, and meditated a moment.

"That is a good job," he said. "I don't doubt that you will make a big haul if you can get into that safe. I know something of John Crafton, who is said to be a rich man, and I have heard that he keeps a good pile of money in his house. I will find out when he is sure to be away, so that you shall have a good chance to do your best."

This was highly satisfactory to the recruits, as well as to the rest of the band, and Red Jack shook hands with Sam Byers and his two friends to bind the bargain.

"If you do that," he said, "it will be the best stroke of work that has come from Tenspot Gulch in a long time, and nobody can question your right to be full members of this crowd. Now, Bob Burrage, before I go I want to say something about a matter that you and I didn't agree on a while ago."

"What's that, Cap?"

"Those Apaches of Conejo's."

"Yes, I remember that. I was sayin' that the cussed red skins ort to be wiped out, and you hold to it that we had better let 'em alone."

"Not exactly that, Bob. I would be as glad as any of you to knock over a few of those bucks; but I don't like to see men throw themselves away when there is nothing to be gained by it. There is a good chance now to get the soldiers to take a hand in the game, and I am going to try to persuade them into it."

"Then we kin take all the tricks without half playin'," remarked Burrage.

"Yes, Bob, I think it is a pretty sure thing. I am on the right side of the Indian agent, who will do all he can to start the thing. But it will be well for you if you can do it without getting picked off, to stir up the red-skins and worry them into raising a row, so that there will be a good excuse for calling in the soldiers."

"We kin stir that much while the pot's a-bilin', Cap, bet yer life. Thar's another p'int about the business. Conejo is laid up sick, and is like to die, and a woman named Felipa is playin' chief."

"Felipa!" exclaimed the old man. "What Felipa?"

"Jest Felipa—that's all I know about her, except that she's a sort of a medicine-woman among 'em."

"That ought to make the job easier. By the way, you know about Marta, the girl who was arrested for shooting Sile Brunton, and who turned up missing?"

Yes, they all knew about Marta—especially Sam Byers and his two friends.

"I have reason to believe that Bill, the Blizzard, ran her off, and that he has taken her to the camp of those same Apaches. I think I found their trail, and that it led in that direction. If you should happen to wipe out that fresh young galoot, it would be no harm, but a good stroke of work for us. But you mustn't harm the girl. Bring her away if you can."

"All right, Cap," replied Burrage. "That's jest the kind of work we like to hev cut out for us. You do your part, and we'll do ours."

When John Wilson rode away from Tenspot Gulch, he chuckled to himself.

"Something had to be done," he muttered. "The band is getting crowded, and some of 'those chaps are entirely too fresh. If the Apache will get away with Bob Burrage and two or three others, I am sure of fixing Sam Byers and his partners, and I think I can manage the rest of them."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALMOST A DUEL.

THE ride of Marta and her friends from Apacheville was not altogether a pleasant one, and to Bill Branch it became positively painful before it was ended.

Although Marta's escape from captivity, and probably from sudden and violent death, was a sufficient cause for rejoicing, there were circumstances connected with the affair that plunged her faithful friend into a fit of the blues.

Her joy at regaining her freedom naturally

made her light-hearted and gay, and it may be that the novelty of her boy's attire inspired her with a spirit of mischief. She was full of fun, and the arrows of her wit were mostly aimed at poor Bill, who, it must be confessed, cut a sorry figure in the rags and dirt of John Smith, the tramp.

But this was not all, or the worst of it.

In striking contrast to the Blizzard was Dave Hillyer, arrayed in all his fine feathers as the dandy from Topnotch, and showing more brilliantly than ever by the side of the ugliness of his comrade.

Bill Branch was thoroughly disgusted with his own appearance, and the attentions which Dave lavished upon Marta, and which she received with evident pleasure, disgusted him yet more. It was for her that he had loaded himself with those rags and that dirt, and he naturally thought that she ought to show a better appreciation of his sacrifice and his service.

But the perverseness of her nature prevented her from doing so, and the poor fellow was hurt. He became so moody and silent that she could not help taking notice of his ill-humor.

"What is the matter with you, Bill?" she asked. "I never saw you so sullen and grumpy."

"I was wondering," he roughly replied, "whether it was Marta that I pulled out of the jail last night, or some imp in the shape of a boy."

"Indeed, sir!" she exclaimed. "If you can't speak to me more politely than that, I shall have nothing more to say to you."

She kept her word, and the unpleasantness continued until they reached the Apache village.

"Is that the safe place that Bill was speaking about?" she asked, as Felipa and several Indians came out to meet them.

"That is the place, and a good place it is, too," replied Hillyer, who had told her of his adventure with the norther. "It is the village of Conejo's Apaches, who are as white a set of people as I have seen anywhere."

"We will be safer with them, I know, than with the drunken white scoundrels who were howling after me in Apacheville."

Felipa stared when she saw Marta, and looked wonderingly at the Blizzard; but the position of affairs was soon explained to her, and she welcomed them all graciously and gracefully.

Bill Branch hastened to wash the dirt from his person and to clothe himself like a decent white man, and the improvement in his appearance was so great that Marta smiled on him when he returned to the village.

She seemed to have resumed her own nature with her own clothing, and would have been glad to close the gap that had been made between them; but he could not so easily forget his hurts, and nursed his discontent in silence.

Marta had no difficulty in guessing what was the matter with him; but it seemed to her that he was unreasonable in his wrath, as she had never given him any right to be jealous of her.

Dave Hillyer, too, was not satisfied with the situation of affairs, and could not see that there was any gain in it to him, as Marta had hardly anything to say to him since she perceived that she had so deeply offended her friend.

He thought it would be well for him to try to smooth over the difficulty and put matters on a friendly footing all around.

So when Branch sauntered out early in the morning for a stroll, Hillyer followed him and overtook him.

"What is the matter with you, Bill?" he asked. "You don't seem to be yourself at all. What has come over you? Own up, old man. An honest confession is good for the soul."

"I have nothing to confess," shortly replied the Blizzard. "As far as you are concerned, you have taken an unfair advantage of me."

"I? I don't see it."

"But I see it plainly enough."

"I never take an unfair advantage of any man if I know it. What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have been undermining me with Marta. You knew that I put on those rags for the purpose of getting her out of that jail, and that she laughed at me because I looked like a loafer. Then you took advantage of your fine clothes and dandy airs to make up to her and shove me aside."

"I feel like laughing, Bill Branch; but I won't insult you by laughing at you. What you say is absurd—in fact, it is ridiculous. I am not responsible for what a girl may take it into her head to do."

"But you are responsible for what you do yourself."

"You may bet your bottom dollar on that," replied Dave, flaring up. "I am responsible to any man, at any time, and in any way."

"I will hold you responsible, too."

"You had better not push this thing too far, Bill Branch, or I may get out of patience. I don't see that you have any right to object to my being on friendly terms with the girl. That is for her to decide, not you. I don't believe that she belongs to you, and if I choose to push my chance I sha'n't let you stop me."

"Is that the way you carry it off? We will

see about that. You have been pushing your chance, as you call it, quite too far and too fast."

"You may bet that I will do as I please. As you are bound to be huffy about it, we may as well settle the matter right now."

"Come on, then!" exclaimed the Blizzard. "Our pistols shall settle it!"

He led the way to a spot where the ridge of rock shut them off from sight and hearing of the Apache village, and turned and faced the friend who had become his foe.

Both were hot-headed, and their faces showed that they had let their anger get the better of them, as they stood and glared at each other.

"We will toss up for the word," said the Blizzard. "Then we will stand back to back and step off ten paces each. At the word we will turn and fire as we please. Is that fair?"

"That is fair," replied Hillyer, as he drew a half dollar from his pocket.

"Heads!" said Branch, as the dandy from Topnotch flipped up the coin, and heads it was.

Without another word the two men took their stations, back to back, and walked away from each other with measured steps.

In spite of the hate that was in their hearts, and the deadly purpose that had brought them into that position, neither had the least thought of treachery, or of taking any unfair advantage of his opponent.

Before Bill Branch had finished his ten steps, he stopped, and with a little hesitation he spoke:

"I say, Dave!"

"Hello, Bill!"

"I don't think I will give the word just yet. Suppose you turn around."

Dave turned and faced him. As they walked away from each other the color of anger had left their faces, and its fire had gone out of their eyes.

"It has just occurred to me," remarked Bill, "that we are making fools of ourselves. That is to say, I know that I have been making a fool of myself."

"I won't dispute that, Bill, and will only add that you may count me in the same list."

"This is the very thing, partner, that we had agreed not to quarrel about."

"Just so, old man."

"And we don't know whether she really cares for either of us, and she wouldn't be likely to admire the one who knocked the other over."

"That's a fact."

"That's not all. We agreed to see her out of the Sile Brunton scrape, and she is not clear yet."

"We have got to look after the Englishman, too, Bill."

"You are right. I was forgetting him. She makes a point of the Englishman, too. The best thing we can do, Bill, will be to see which can do the most for her, and not spoil the whole business by quarreling."

"Your head is level again. And now we had better go back to the village."

Marta was waiting for them, and she regarded them curiously as they approached her. Both of them tried to look unconcerned, and succeeded in looking sheepish.

"Where have you been, you two?" she asked.

"Just taking a morning walk," replied Dave.

"Is that all? Did you find any hostiles where you went?"

She looked to Bill for an answer.

"Nothing but friends," he replied, with a smile.

"I am glad to hear that, and I am glad to see, Bill Branch, that you have brought back the good-humor you lost."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MARTA AS A SEER.

BILL THE BLIZZARD had indeed regained his lost good-humor, and with it came an intense desire to serve Marta or to please her. At night he and Dave Hillyer had a consultation with her, to decide what move should next be made in the campaign.

The two young men were firm in the belief that the train-robbers and Sam Byers were responsible for the death of Sile Brunton, and that their capture would be necessary to the clearing of Marta. They were also agreed that the men they sought would eventually "bring up" in Red Jack's band at Tenspot Gulch, if they had not already taken refuge there. At Tenspot Gulch, also, they might expect to find Howard Creveling. Consequently, as they had previously settled it, everything centered around the Englishman.

"I wish we could know for certain whether he is there yet and how he is getting on," remarked Branch. "I don't believe they have done him any harm. They are probably holding him for a ransom, or something of the sort."

"As he had business in the Gulch," said Hillyer, "his business must have been with Red Jack, and it is to be supposed that that speculator has more ways than one of getting the best of a bargain."

"I wish we knew, Dave. Perhaps Marta could help us out. She has got the name of

being able to see things that are out of the reach of other folks' eyes."

"No, Bill, no!" exclaimed Marta, as she blushed, and then turned pale. "You mustn't speak of such things."

"Wait a moment," said Dave Hillyer as he fixed his eyes on the girl, who shrank from his gaze. "Yes, it is so. She is a good subject."

"Don't do it," she feebly entreated. "Please don't. I am afraid. It hurts me."

But the dandy from Topnotch kept his eyes upon her until he had fixed her gaze, and then made a few passes. Her resistance ceased, and she sank back as if in a stupor.

"What are you doing, Dave?" demanded the Blizzard. "None of your Topnotch tricks, now."

"This is all square, Bill. She has gone into a trance. Now we will be likely to learn what we want to know. Marta, I want you to go into Tenspot Gulch, until you reach a little brook that comes down from the hills. Is that right, Bill?"

"Yes, that's the place."

"It is a bad road," she muttered; "so rough and cold and damp."

"But go on until you reach the end. What do you see there?"

"It is dark, very dark. I see a great cavern, and before me a black water. A torch is burning on the other side."

"Cross the water, Marta, and go on."

She shuddered convulsively, and the muscles of her face twitched, as if she was in agony.

"This won't do, Dave," protested the Blizzard. "It is too hard on her. I am afraid."

"There is more of the cavern across the water," said Marta. "The room is wide and long, and there are smaller rooms beyond."

"Do you see the Englishman?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, as a joyful smile shone in her face. "He is safe, and is sitting alone in one of the small rooms. It is dark and damp there, but he has a lamp. He seems to be restless and uneasy. He takes from his breast-pocket a ring. It is the ring I gave him at the Casino."

"What else do you see, Marta?"

"There are men in the cavern—rough, ugly men. I am afraid of them."

"Do you see anybody you know?"

"No—nobody I know. It frightens me to look at them."

"Come away, then!"

Hillyer moved his hand, and the girl awoke, trembling and staring.

"Where have I been?" she asked. "What have I seen? What have I said?"

"You have been in Tenspot Gulch, and up to the haunt of Red Jack's gang," replied Bill Branch. "You told us that the Englishman is there, alive and well."

"Oh, I am so glad! But you must not send me there any more. It is too hard."

"You shall be troubled no more, Marta. We know where Mr. Creveling is now, and we must get him out of there."

This was easier to say than to do. No two men could be expected to face Red Jack's gang and storm his stronghold, and both force and strategy would be required to effect the release of the Englishman.

As Marta had not seen the train-robbers in the cavern during her trance, it was supposed that they might not have left Apacheville, and Dave Hillyer thought that he had better go there and look them up. At the same time he could enlist some men for a campaign against Red Jack's band.

Bill Branch was of the opinion that an opening to Red Jack's cavern haunt might be found somewhere in the hills. As there was a lake in the rock, and water ran from the lake down into the Gulch, it was reasonable to suppose that there was a stream that fed the lake, and that the source of the stream might be discovered and followed. Bill proposed that he should stay there and look for the supposed opening, so that the campaign might be made effective.

These propositions were submitted to Marta, who approved of both of them, and early the next morning Dave Hillyer set out for Apacheville.

"You must tote fair, Bill," he said, as he took leave of his friend. "Don't play any tricks on me while I am gone."

"All right, Dave. I will attend strictly to partnership business and nothing else."

In pursuance of his intention to attend to partnership business, the Blizzard took his rifle and sallied forth to inspect the region that lay back of Tenspot Gulch.

Marta begged him, as he left the village, to be careful of himself and to place his own safety above every other consideration.

"I don't believe there is anything I need to guard against," he replied. "I shall feel quite safe, I know, as I am going on business for you, as well as for the Englishman."

"But you must take care of yourself. I am afraid that something is to happen to you. I feel that you are going into danger. Do take care of yourself for my sake, Bill."

"I will do my best, Marta."

He walked away gayly, feeling as if he could

defy all sorts of danger with such a send-off, and did not give a second thought to Marta's warning words.

The region that he inspected was rough and broken, crossed by rocky ridges and intersected by difficult ravines. He climbed the ridges and descended into the ravines, hoping to find a passage that might lead to Red Jack's stronghold; but the most careful examination disclosed nothing of the kind.

He went on until he came to a singular chasm. It was not wide, but seemed to be very deep. He looked over the edge, but could see nothing in the darkness below. He threw in stones and listened to hear them strike the bottom, but heard nothing.

This, he thought, was more likely than any of the other ravines to give a passage that would open into Tenspot Gulch, and he wished that he could descend and examine it.

As he stood at the edge of the chasm thinking how he could accomplish his purpose he was startled by the crack of a rifle.

At the same instant he felt a sharp twinge in his side.

The bullet had merely grazed his flesh, but the start it gave him, rather than the shock of the slight wound, caused him to lose his balance and fall over into the chasm.

But he did not lose the command of his senses or the use of his limbs.

He saw a projecting point of rock, and clutched at it as he was going down.

The jerk caused by his sudden stoppage seemed nearly to wrench his arm from its socket, but he held on and caught the rock with his other hand. Then he perceived that he could easily lower himself to a narrow ledge, where he rested in safety.

But not in absolute safety; for he heard voices above that betokened danger.

He knew that he had been shot at with a murderous intention, and did not doubt that the assassins had come up to make sure that their foul work was finished.

It would be well to give them that satisfaction, he drew himself in under the shadow of the rock, where he waited and listened.

The voices came nearer, and soon he knew that the men who spoke were looking over the edge of the chasm.

"You settled him, Bob, for sure," said one.

"There ain't no gittin' out o' that," replied the other. "The job is done."

"It was done in fine style. If the shot didn't kill him, the tumble would be sure to fetch him."

"Yes, we've made an end of that galoot, and it's a good job, well done."

"But are you sure that he was the Blizzard, Bob?"

"Sartin. Not a cent o' discount on that. Seems to me that I see some Injuns skulkin' over yonder. We had better git away from yer, or we may hev a nest o' hornets about our ears."

The two men evidently went away, but Bill Branch was in no hurry to extricate himself from his position.

As he had got so far down, he thought he might as well see how much further he could go, and he climbed down the slippery rock until he reached a wall so steep that further descent was impossible.

He could not see the bottom of the narrow gulch; but it seemed to him that he could hear water flowing at no great distance below, and this strengthened his belief that he had found an opening that might lead to the outlaws' den.

With great labor he worked his way back to the point from which he had descended, and laid down on the ledge to rest. In spite of his hard bed he fell into a doze.

When he awoke he looked about to find a way to climb up out of the chasm, and he was about to begin the ascent when he heard voices above.

CHAPTER XXV.

LOSS AND GAIN.

FELIPA had seen the parting between Bill Branch and Marta, and had heard the words that were spoken. When the young man had been watched until he was out of sight, she called the girl into her tepee, and looked at her closely.

"Marta," she said, "you love that young man."

"That is your guess," quietly replied the girl.

"I am sure of it. He is a fine young man, as good as gold, and as true as steel. As you love him, why should you not tell him so?"

"Ought I not to wait until he asks me to?"

"It is easy to guess that he has asked you."

"Not since I left Apacheville. Before then I did not know—"

"You were not sure that you loved him? Very well; but now that you know it, I hope that when he asks you again you will not fail to tell him the truth. I have a great love for you, Marta, if you will allow a poor Indian woman to love you. You remind me of some one whom I must have known long ago, and sometimes I feel sure that I have seen you often."

"Surely you have," replied Marta. "I have

heard you say that you have often visited Apachville, dressed as a Mexican, and that you have been in the Casino."

"Not there and not then. That is not what I mean. I am trying to say that your face, your voice, your air—something about you, or everything—seems very familiar to me, and I feel as if I must have known you long ago. Where did you come from, Marta? Who were your parents?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? But somebody must have cared for you and brought you up."

"Oh, yes. That was Mr. John Creveton, a rich old man in Apacheville, or one who is supposed to be rich. You must have heard of him. He has been like a father to me ever since I can remember; but he says that I am the child of an old friend of his, who is dead."

"You go by the name of Marta Creveton, then?"

"Yes, but I have no right to that name, nor to any other, that I know of. Now, Felipa, as I have told you all I know about myself, I wish you would satisfy my curiosity, and tell me who you are and where you came from. You speak English so well, and are so unlike the Apaches, that I am sure you cannot be an Indian."

Felipa hesitated a little, and her voice was sad and broken when she replied, as if she was oppressed by painful memories.

"You are right, Marta. I am a Mexican by birth; but I have lived among the Americans, and that is what caused me to have trouble with my own people—trouble that drove me to the Indians, who were kind to me when those who should have protected me drove me away. Now I am a medicine-woman of the Apaches—that is all."

"You have given me only a hint of what I wanted to know," said Marta. "I am sure there is a story behind what you have told."

"It would not please you to hear that story, my child. I am glad that you love Bill Branch, and I wish I knew more about you."

They separated, but were brought together after a while by the arrival of an Apache youth, who had been out looking for game, and who ran into the village to bring a tale of sad disaster.

He told Felipa that he had seen the white stranger standing at the edge of a ravine and looking down into it. Then he saw two white men creeping toward him under cover of the rocks. One of them raised his rifle and fired, and Felipa's friend fell over into the ravine. The two white men came up then, and looked around. Then they went away, and the Apache hurried to the village.

Felipa briefly repeated this story to Marta; but the anxious girl had already made a quick guess at what had happened.

The shock was a terrible one, and Felipa put her arms around the girl, fearing that she was about to fall.

But she did not faint, though she turned deathly pale, and it was some time before she could get breath to speak.

"They have killed him!" she exclaimed, in a dry and husky voice. "That is what I was afraid of. I warned him against it, and begged him to take care of himself. Oh, I wish I was a man!"

"Perhaps he is not dead," suggested Felipa.

"They would never have left him alive, the scoundrels!"

"But there is a chance. I will go and look for him. If he is dead, I will find his body."

"You must let me go with you, then."

Felipa hastily gave some directions to the men about her, and in a few moments she left the village with Marta, accompanied by a dozen Apaches, well armed, and provided with ropes of hide and horse-hair.

The youth who had brought the bad news led them by an easier and speedier route than that which the Blizzard had taken; but it was a rough and tiresome tramp at the best, and Marta was almost exhausted when they reached the ravine.

The most experienced trailers scanned the ground carefully, and made out the tracks of Bill Branch and the two assassins. Then they looked down into the ravine, but could see or hear nothing there.

After a consultation it was decided to knot together some riatas, and lower down the lightest man of the party, to make a thorough search.

Marta knelt at the edge of the chasm; but her tears would have blinded her sight if there had been anything to see as she gazed down into the darkness.

"He is dead!" she exclaimed. "He could not have lived. Oh, my one dear one, I shall never see him again! He is dead! He is dead!"

The cheerful tones of a clear and manly voice came up from below.

"Nobody dead here! Send down a line if you can, and help me to get out of this."

It was the voice of Bill Branch, and Marta was the first to seize a riata and lower it to him.

In a few moments he had climbed out of the ravine, and was standing before them, safe, sound and smiling.

But Marta had fallen back, covered with

blushes, and she did not step forward when he reached out his hand.

"Won't you shake hands with me?" he asked.

"What is the matter?"

"I was afraid you were dead," she muttered.

"And here I am, alive and well. But I would fall into that hole again, to hear the words that I heard from your lips a little bit ago."

"You can hear them without taking that trouble, Bill."

And she gave him, not one hand, but both her arms, and no more words were needed to explain their relations to each other.

"Are you not wounded, Bill?" she asked.

"A shot was fired. Did it not hit you?"

"Yes; but it was only a graze."

"What was it, then, that knocked you over?"

"I was startled, I suppose, like a baby, and lost my balance. But I have no hurt worth speaking of, and will prove it by walking back to the village with you."

On the way the young man related his adventure, and Felipa listened with the deepest interest.

"What were you doing there?" she asked. "Why were you standing at the edge of that gulch?"

"I was thinking of the Englishman, as well as of Marta," he replied. "It seemed to me that there must be some way of getting at Red Jack's cavern without going into Tenspot Gulch, as I know that a stream of water comes out from there, and it must go in somewhere. I was examining the cuts about here, looking for a water course, and when I came to that gulch I was almost sure that I had found the right place. I got far enough down to hear the sound of running water, but could not reach the bottom."

"Your guess was a good one," she said, "and I suppose you struck the right place. But why are you so anxious about the Englishman?"

"Because I was his guide when he got into that scrape, and for Marta's sake."

Felipa turned upon the girl a look of wonder and intense interest.

"For Marta's sake? What has the Englishman to do with Marta?"

"She took quite a fancy to him, and she seemed to know a great deal about him."

Marta was obliged to satisfy the curiosity of the medicine-woman, who insisted upon an explanation.

She related how John Crafton had thrown her into a trance, as he had frequently done before, and when she came out of it had told her about Howard Creveling, who was expected from England. He had given her instructions concerning that gentleman, which she had complied with when she met him at the Casino. As Bill said, she had taken quite a fancy to him, but not for any special reason that she knew of.

"It is very strange," muttered Felipa. "Who is John Crafton, and why does he take such an interest in that Englishman?"

"Why, Felipa, what do you know about it?" asked Marta. "And why do you take such an interest in those people?"

"I hardly know what I am saying, my child. There is something that I do not understand. Perhaps a light is going to shine out of thick darkness. But there is one thing I am certain of, and that is that I can help you both. I told you, Bill Branch, to come to me when you wanted to find the Englishman. I did not want to make a move to help you, because I was afraid of bringing my people into trouble by fighting Red Jack's scoundrels, and we have hard enough work at the best to keep the soldiers from meddling with us. But it is for Marta's sake, as well as for yours, and I will tell you that there is such a passage as you wanted to find, and that you can get into it easily. I have been there, and I will take you in and show you the way, if Marta will let you go with me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

DOWN IN THE DEPTHS.

BILL BRANCH jumped at Felipa's proposition, and when he reached the Indian village he declared himself ready and anxious to set out at once in search of the passage that led to Red Jack's den.

But Marta, who had fairly begun to assert her ownership of the young man, positively refused to permit him to undertake any further adventures that day, declaring that he needed rest, and that his wound should be attended to.

His wound, indeed, proved to be rather worse than he had suspected, as the bullet had grazed a rib; but Felipa was skilled in the Apache practice of surgery, and after her dressing there could be no doubt that the wound would soon heal.

The young man, indeed, was not greatly averse to the enforced delay, just at that time. He was by no means at a loss for such occupation as would make the moments fly. Marta was there, and she loved him, and was willing to tell him so, and that all-important subject had to be discussed in all its bearings and viewed in all its lights.

"We don't have to ask any person's consent," said he, "and we will be two orphans together when we are married—that is, if you mean to marry me, Marta, as I hope you do."

"Would you really be willing to marry a girl out of that Casino?" she asked.

"The Casino never troubled me, dear one. I always knew that your heart was in the right place, wherever you might be."

"I never mean to go back to the Casino, Bill, whatever happens. So, if you will have me—"

"Have you? Oh, Marta!"

The rest of his opinion was not expressed in words, as they had better business for their lips than talking just then.

"But you will have to change your ways, too, Bill," said Marta. "When you are mine I am not going to have you acting as a scout or a guide for anybody, or doing any dangerous work that you do not really need to do."

"What shall I do, then, sweetheart?"

"Oh, there is plenty to do. You must take a ranch and settle down. I would be perfectly happy in a quiet spot near a stream, with a nice little house, and plenty of grazing ground, and lots of sheep—and with you, Bill."

Then followed an interval of expressive silence, and this sort of thing was kept up until they retired to rest, doubtless to dream of a continuation of the same old story.

Early in the morning the Blizzard set out with Felipa, accompanied by an Apache who carried torches prepared for the occasion.

At a little distance from the village they struck into a cross-gully, tending northward, which they descended until they reached a deep and narrow ravine.

This, Felipa said, was the passage that led to the rear of the cavern occupied by Red Jack's band. As there was a small stream of water at the bottom of the ravine, Bill Branch had no doubt that he had found what he was seeking.

One of the torches was lighted, and the party proceeded to pick their way down the ravine.

They could have done nothing without a torch, as the cleft was so deep and narrow that scarcely a ray of light penetrated to the bottom, where there was not room enough for two to walk abreast. The ravine was difficult, too, as well as deep, and falling rocks had made it almost impassable in places.

They had traveled about a quarter of a mile in this way, when the Blizzard suddenly stopped.

"Now I know that I am in the right place," he said. "Here is my rifle that I dropped when I tumbled into this ditch. I am afraid that it will never be of any more use as a rifle; but I will pick it up when we come back."

They went on until they came to what seemed to be the end of the gulch, as the stream of water sunk out of sight in a hole in the rock which was too small to permit them to follow it further.

"We are stumped now," said the young man, as he looked around and saw nothing but the dark walls of the gulch.

"Not quite," replied Felipa. "Follow me."

She took the torch, and disclosed a narrow passage in the rock, which she entered, followed by Bill Branch and the Apache.

The passage led into a small cavern, in which a dozen men might have stood together; but nothing could be seen beyond it, and the further progress of the party appeared to be effectually barred.

"This is too much for me, Felipa," said the Blizzard. "I can't guess why you have brought us here."

"Hush!" she replied in a whisper. "You mustn't raise your voice here. There is only a little rock between you and Red Jack's cavern, and it will not do to show a light."

She had, indeed, given the torch to the Apache, who carried it out of sight.

"Listen!" she said, as she laid her hand on the young man's shoulder, and he listened intently.

Soon they caught the sound of voices in the distance, which came nearer, until they could hear them plainly and distinguish the words that were spoken.

One of the speakers had a rough, loud and coarse voice, and the other was evidently an older man, who spoke more quietly and in a lower tone.

"So it's all right, Cap," said the loud-voiced man, "and you've fixed it up for them fellers in Apacheville."

"Yes, I have fixed it," replied the other.

"Thar ain't no mistake about it, I hope—no chance for them fellers to git into a scrape."

"If they do, it will be their own fault. I let them know when John Crafton would be away, so that they could crack his safe easy."

"I'm partie'lar about that business, Cap, because I like Sam Byers, and I am sure that his two pards must be the right kind. I'll hev to take your word fur it, about the job bein' fixed up all right."

"I suppose you can take my word for it, Bob Burrage. It would be something new and strange if you couldn't. What have you been doing while I have been away?"

"You kin jest bet yer life that I've made a ten-strike. I've wiped out that cantankerous young cuss, Bill the Blizzard."

"What! Is it possible? That sounds too good to be true."

"Sure pop, old man. He was scountin' up in the hills, and I crawled onto him and shot him. He tumbled over into a gulch that thar ain't no bottom to, I reckon, and the fall would ha' wiped him out if the shot didn't do it; but you know me, Cap, and I ain't apt to miss my aim."

"Are you sure it was the Blizzard?"

"Sartin as I am that Red Jack is standin' afore me now."

"And you really shot him, and saw him fall?"

"In course I did! Didn't I say so?"

"Will you swear to it?"

"On a stack o' Bibles, ef you've got 'em."

"Hold up your hand, then, and swear to it."

As Bob Burrage held up his hand, there was an unexpected interruption to the scene. It was caused by Felipa, whose clear, piercing voice startled even Bill Branch.

"Swear to no lie!"

There was a brief cessation of speech in the cavern, followed by oaths and a general bustle.

"This is the second time I have heard that same voice," said Red Jack, after a while. "It is very mysterious."

"'Twasn't none o' my doin'," replied Burrage, "an' I'm just as sartin as ever that I shot that galoot, and saw him fall."

Felipa took her companion by the hand, and whispered to him.

"Let us go. There is nothing more for us to do here."

"I want to know what good this is to do us," replied the Blizzard. "I thought there was an opening, by which we could get into that cavern."

"There is an opening. Here is a rock that can be moved almost as easily as if it was on hinges, and those scoundrels know nothing about it."

"Then I can go in there whenever I want to."

"Yes; but nothing can be done yet awhile. I must keep my people out of trouble if I can, and you must wait until your friend brings help from Apacheville. Come, Bill, let us go back to Marta."

This inducement was sufficient for the young man, and he followed his guide up the Gulch.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BAD SPOKE IN THE WHEEL.

WHEN Red Jack had journeyed about half the distance from Tenspot Gulch to Apacheville, he turned aside into a gully, and ascended it until he was out of sight of the trail he had been following.

He halted at the base of a low cliff, removed some bushes and rubbish that were piled up there, and disclosed a hole in the rock, from which he drew out a bundle composed of various articles of apparel.

He proceeded to disrobe himself, exchanging the clothing he had on for that which he had brought out of the hole, and taking off a wig and a false beard. Shortly he was transformed into a respectable and well-to-do citizen, as far as appearance went, and those who knew John Crafton of Apacheville would have been ready to swear that this was no other than that miserly and mysterious capitalist.

As John Crafton he rode into Apacheville, and in the same character he saluted the acquaintances whom he met on the way.

He stabled his horse, and walked out to his house at the edge of the town, where he let himself in, locked the door on the inside, and began some mysterious operations.

Opening the door of the safe that was let into the rock, he took out a shelf of drawers and carried it into another room, returning with a shelf similar in appearance to that which he had taken away, but which, when opened, disclosed an array of pistol barrels, springs and steel bars.

This infernal machine he fitted into the safe in the place of the shelf he had removed, with the pistol barrels pointing toward the door, and connected it by a wire with the door, so that if the door should be pulled open the wire would be jerked like a bell-pull. He closed the door, leaving it slightly ajar, and the work was done.

He placed in a tin box the valuables that he had taken from the safe, left the house, locking it carefully behind him, and went back to town, where he deposited the tin box in a bank.

Then he sauntered down the street, with a serene consciousness of having done his duty toward himself, if not toward his fellow-men.

As he passed one of the many saloons with which the main street of Apacheville was abundantly supplied, a young man who was coming out staggered against him.

This young man had been drinking, although he was not drunk; but it was not his flushed face and excited look that attracted the attention of John Crafton.

He was the same youth who had been introduced to Howard Creveling in Red Jack's den as the son of Arthur Creveling.

As Mr. Crafton laid a hand on his shoulder he started angrily, and then stared and looked confused.

"Is this you, gov'nor?" he asked. "Durned if it ain't! I've got you so mixed up lately with t'other one, old Red—"

"Hush!" commanded John Crafton. "Can't you hold your crazy tongue? I am glad I have met you, Arthur. I want to have a few minutes' talk with you. Do you know any quiet place where we can sit down and not be overheard?"

"They are all tol'able quiet at this time of day. Come with me, sir, and I'll drop you into the right kind of a hole."

The young man led the way into a saloon, which was certainly quiet enough, and they took seats in a corner.

"It's your treat, gov'nor," said Arthur, as he rapped on the table.

"Seems to me you have been drinking too much already," grumbled Mr. Crafton; but drinks were called for and placed on the table, and they were left alone.

"Now, old gentleman, what's the news?" asked Arthur, as the liquor put new life into him. "How is the Englishman getting on?"

"He is as stubborn as ever, if not more so; but I will bring him to terms. He is not the one who troubles me now, Arthur. It is you."

"What's the matter with me, then?"

"How can you ask what is the matter, when any man can see with half an eye that you are drinking hard, and driving yourself to the deuce as fast as you can go?"

"You are mistaken about that, gov'nor. I drink awfully easy."

"Don't play off any of your last year's almanac jokes on me, young man. You are a fool—that's what's the matter with you—and I am afraid that you are going to spoil the work that I have been laboring at for these many years. I said, when you were a baby, that the time should come when my son would reign as a master in the house where I was a servant, and to accomplish that end I have been striving and scheming ever since. I have brought you up well, and have given you as good an education as I could, so that you might be fitted to take the place which I have destined for you. I have played my cards shrewdly and patiently, and now the time will soon come when I shall realize all I have hoped for—unless my plans are overthrown by your confounded folly. You don't know what you are throwing away. To be master of Balcombe is a great thing, not only in the value of the estate, but because of the position it gives."

This serious admonition seemed to sober the young man. At least, it stupefied him to some extent.

"I don't see how I am throwing away anything," he said. "I am sure I don't want to throw away anything. Tell me what you want me to do, gov'nor, and I'll try to do it."

"I want you to behave yourself. If you can't

drink moderately, quit drinking entirely. Act like a modest, quiet, gentle young man, or come as near to it as possible. You are making a fool of yourself now, and I am afraid that when I get ready for you to play your hand in this game, I will find you laid up with the tremors, or soaking in a gutter."

"No you won't, gov'nor. I am going to brace up and give myself a square deal. You can depend on that."

"I hope I can; and in that hope I shall feel encouraged to persevere. Remember your promise, Arthur. Everything hangs on that."

"All right, sir. By the way, you must let me have some money before you go."

The old man's face clouded up again.

"More money?" he exclaimed. "What have you done with all I gave you? Have you been gambling?"

"I confess, sir, that I have dropped some in that way. Everybody does it here. In fact, I am about cleaned out, and I can't get along without money, you know."

"Well, you are a fool. But you will have to quit cards and liquor both, after this, or I will cut loose from you. Here is a stake."

Mr. Crafton laid a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table.

"Is that all?" asked the young man, looking gloomily at the coin.

"It is enough for all your needs until I see you again—a great plenty, unless you want to plunge headlong into dissipation, and I am not going to furnish money for that sort of thing. I will leave you now, Arthur, again advising you to take care of yourself."

"Are you going back to—"

"Yes—be careful how you talk. I shall leave Apacheville within an hour."

The old man turned away without shaking hands with the young one, and left the saloon.

"The infernal old skinflint!" muttered Arthur, as he thrust the coin into his pocket. "I am keen to set that in that English business he is taking two steps for himself to one for me. But he sha'n't make a dog of me, if I know myself. If he wanted me to please him, why didn't he try to please me? As that's his style, I may as well please myself."

This very undutiful young man left the saloon in which he had listened impatiently to his father's admonitions, and went direct to the house from which he had emerged when John Crafton encountered him.

As he opened the door he met a handsome and gayly-dressed young man, who was in the act of leaving the place—none other than the dandy sport from the Topnotch district.

"So you have come back, my young friend," remarked Dave Hillyer.

"Yes, and I hope you are not going out."

"I was about to sally forth. Can you offer me any inducement to remain?"

"I want to try my hand at euchre again. You have had big luck, but I think I can worry you."

"Very well. I have half an hour or so to spare."

They seated themselves at a small table, and called for a pack of cards. Arthur laid on the table the twenty-dollar gold-piece which he had just received.

"Five dollars a game until that is gone or doubled," said he.

"My young friend," observed Dave, "this has slightly the appearance of being what a sporting man might style a small piece of business; but I am willing to play a few games with you for pastime."

In less than half an hour Arthur's twenty dollars had found their way into the pocket of his antagonist, and his look was woe-begone.

The gentleman from Topnotch furnished him with liquor, and gave him some advice.

"My young friend," said Dave, "it seems to me that card-playing is not your strong point. You are too nervous and too unlucky. There is no money for you in gambling, and you had better quit it."

"It's all in luck," replied Arthur. "The cards will run awfully against a fellow sometimes, but luck changes. I will see you again to-night, and will have money to say that I can beat you. Where will I find you?"

"That is hard to say," answered Dave, who did not seem to take much interest in such small game.

"I will find you, if you are in Apacheville, and get even."

The young man left the saloon, followed by the pitying smile of the dandy from Topnotch.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TRAP AND THE VICTIM.

As Arthur Crafton—or Wilson, or whatever he may be called—left the saloon, there was a sullen, evil look in his face.

"The old skinflint's twenty dollars are gone already," he muttered. "I'd like to know how he expects me to try to please him when he treats me so shabbily. But he sha'n't make a dog of me. There is money in that old house of his, and I reckon I am smart enough to get hold of it."

He walked down the main street of Apacheville until he had passed beyond the business portion of the town.

Looking around, he saw John Crafton riding toward him, and slipped out of sight, as he did not care to be afflicted by another interview with that gentleman.

Mr. Crafton passed by, and Arthur watched him until he had ridden away from Apacheville, far out upon the plain, in the direction of Tenspot Gulch.

Then the young man slowly and moodily marched back up the street.

"The gov'nor is good for a two days' stay, and the coast is clear," he said. "But it won't do to make any move before night, and it is supper time, too."

But after supper the desire for drink came upon him strongly, and he easily yielded to it, under the plea that he must get up nerve for the deed that he intended to do.

As his credit was good at the bar of the hotel, as well as at the office, he drank freely and treated liberally, and the result was that before the night was far advanced he was carried up-stairs and put to bed in a state of drunken stupor.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, consumed by a raging thirst, and oppressed by a feeling that

he had done or left undone something of great importance.

After he had refreshed himself vigorously at the bar, the tangles in his brain began to straighten out, and he remembered his purpose of the previous evening. He perceived that he had let the night pass without accomplishing anything, and unanimously voted himself a fool of the first magnitude.

But his chance, though delayed, was not lost. John Crafton was good, as he had said, for at least a two days' absence, and Arthur resolved that the deed should be done that night without fail.

He had the day before him, however, and he experienced the pain of impotency in his efforts to get rid of time. He could not gamble, as he had no money, and even his credit for whisky was limited, and he considered himself a deserving young man to whom fortune was extremely unkind.

The long hours passed away, as the longest hours must pass, and when night came on, having been reasonably abstemious during the day, he deemed it his duty to get up some nerve for the work before him, and proceeded to drink himself into what he considered to be the proper condition for business.

But his progress in that direction was stayed by the stalwart barkeeper at the hotel.

"Young man, you'll have to drop this sort of thing," remarked that individual. "You've ran your face here as far as it will go, and you can't hang up nothin' more until you settle."

As Arthur turned away, dispirited and disgusted, he saw Dave Hillyer in the room. He at once approached the delegate from Topnotch, and "braced him" for the loan of a dollar.

"Certainly, my young friend," replied Dave, "and I will take pleasure in making it a five. Anything to please the child, as the nurse said when she let the baby crawl out of the third-story window."

"Much obliged," said Arthur. "I will have plenty of money soon, and will pay you. My father, you see, is Mr. John Crafton—that is, I mean to say that Mr. Crafton is my guardian—and he is a rich man here, and I am going to come into a big property to England before long."

He hurried away from the saloon without stopping to share his money with the barkeeper.

"Queer chap, that," mused Hillyer. "He don't seem to know whether his father is his guardian, or his guardian is his father. Perhaps it's neither of them. But there may be something in his talk. I heard him speak yesterday of a rich uncle from England who had come over to look him up. Possibly that may be the Englishman in whom Marta takes an interest, and the young fellow's yarn seems to chime in with the story Bill Branch told me. I must keep an eye on that cub, and prospect him for all he is worth."

In pursuance of this intention Dave Hillyer sauntered down the main street of Apacheville until he saw three men riding into town, and upon them his interest was immediately concentrated. They were Sam Byers, Dick Clements and Bob Risley.

These three men were partially disguised, as they had been when they previously visited Apacheville; but they had been pointed out to Dave on Sile Brunton's day, and he recognized them. At that time he had not deemed it proper to try to arrest them; but it was a different matter now.

"Here is better game," he said. "The young fellow can wait. No danger that he will get far away from here. These beauties are my mutton just now."

He followed them until they had stabled their horses and gone into a saloon. Then he stepped into a neighboring bar-room and gave a quiet signal, which was quietly answered by four men who were seated there.

He stepped into the street again and stationed himself where he could watch the door of the place into which Byers and his companions had gone.

When those three came out and walked away he went to the other saloon and looked in.

The four men arose and followed him.

Byers and the others walked steadily on, followed by Dave Hillyer, behind whom came at a greater distance the four men whom he had summoned to his aid.

The night was very dark, and when they had got beyond the glaring lights of the main street they were able to close up without being discovered.

The three men in the lead evidently knew just where they were going to, and pushed right on until they reached John Crafton's house. Everything was dark and quiet in that quarter.

After a brief delay they effected an opening at the door, and two of them went in, leaving the third on guard without.

Dave Hillyer and his men drew their pistols and pressed forward.

A strange, startled cry sounded from within the house, and the man who was left outside hastily stepped in. The delegate from Topnotch and his party ran up and entered the house at his heels.

The sight they saw there, by the light of a single candle, was enough to account for the cry they had heard.

The door of a safe in the wall was wide open, and the interior of the safe looked as if it had been struck by a tornado, the barrels of several deadly weapons gleaming out from among shattered drawers and shelves.

Sam Byers, Dick Clements and Bob Risley stood in front of the safe, staring at the body of a young man that lay on the floor, riddled with bullets.

The noise made by the new-comers caused Byers to turn his head, and he saw that he and his companions were covered by five cocked pistols.

"Hold up your hands!" ordered Hillyer. "We have got the drop on you, dead."

"It looks that way," remarked Byers. "What sort of a game are you up to?"

"Give me your weapons, and I will tell you. You are my prisoners."

"I hope you don't think we have had anythin' to do with the lightnin' that struck this lad."

"I know nothing about it. That is not what I want you for."

"What is it, then?" eagerly asked Dick Clements, whose memory quickly ran back over his career.

"I want you for the murder of Sile Brunton."

The manner in which the faces of the three men lighted up threw into Hillyer's mind a sudden doubt of their guilt. Whatever crimes they might have

committed, it was plain that they considered themselves clear of this charge.

"If that is all," said Sam Byers, "we are as innocent as new-born babies, and are ready to go right along with you and face the music."

When the three prisoners had been disarmed, Dave Hillyer examined the body on the floor, and he uttered an exclamation of surprise as he recognized the young man in whom he had lately taken an interest.

"Do you know him?" asked Byers.

"Yes. Do you?"

"Sorter. The man who calls himself his guardian is John Wilson, known hereabouts as Red Jack."

"Is that so? The man I know as his guardian is John Crafton, who is the owner of this house and quite a prominent citizen of Apacheville."

"That's the ticket!" exclaimed Byers, with an oath. "That makes me sartin of what I've been suspectin' all along. Boys, Red Jack and John Crafton are the same man. He put up this safe job on us, and this young sucker has tumbled into the trap."

Dave Hillyer opened his eyes a little wider as he began to see his way to some valuable information.

"I suppose," said he, "that you could tell something worth hearing if you cared to."

"I don't know about that," replied Byers. "I know that I and my partners mean to get even with Red Jack, and that you are barkin' up the wrong tree when you bring Sile Brunton's death ag'in us."

"That may be. Perhaps you will find it worth your while to talk before long. Just now I must take you to jail and put a guard over you."

CHAPTER XXIX.

SERIOUS CHARGE.

When John Wilson returned to Tenspot Gulch from his journey to Apacheville, he was in good spirits; for he had prepared a trap for the man he wanted to get rid of, and there was only the misconduct of his son to weigh upon his mind.

He sought Sam Byers and his partners, and assured them that they would find nothing in the way of their intended raid upon John Crafton's strong box.

"Mr. Crafton has left town," he said, "and it will be three or four days before he returns. If you get up there to-morrow night you ought to be able to make a sure thing of the job."

"Are you sure he has gone away?" asked Sam Byers.

"Of course I am."

"Where has he gone to?"

"He has gone up toward the Pass, to look after some mining property."

"You seem to know a heap about his goin's on, boss."

"Why shouldn't I? He is quite a public character in Apacheville. You speak as if you were suspicious of somebody or something, Sam Byers. If you don't care to make the strike, you can leave it alone. It is nothing to me."

"Oh, we will try it fast enough, and it won't be our fault if we don't make it. If that's any hitch, we'll know what it means."

The man's tone was very disagreeable to John Wilson, who felt relieved when the three recruits, the next morning, had set out for Apacheville.

His elation was then so plainly visible, that Bob Burrage watched him closely, saying to his confidants that there must be some sort of devilment afoot, to put Red Jack in such a good-humor.

But nothing of importance occurred at the cavern until Burrage brought in the news of the death of Bill the Blizzard, and the mysterious voice that had previously startled John Wilson was again heard to utter its shrill command.

Again there was consternation, and again a quick and careful search was made, but with no effect, and the mysterious voice was as much a mystery as ever.

"That party seems to be after you with a sharp stick, as the Yankees say," remarked Howard Creveling, in whose presence this scene had transpired.

"What party?" demanded Wilson.

"The party that warned your man against swearing to a lie, and I think the voice is in the right, for I don't believe his statement now any more than I believed yours a while ago."

"Then you don't believe that young Branch is dead?"

"I am happy to say that I do not."

"You seem to take a lively interest in that fellow, Mr. Creveling."

"I have my own ideas about that young fellow, as you term him. I was brought here to find my brother's son; but I believe that I would have been more likely to succeed in my search if I had stopped short of Tenspot Gulch."

"What sort of a fancy has taken possession of you now?"

"I mean to say, John Wilson, that young Branch comes much nearer having the Creveling features than the young person you were trying to palm off upon me as Arthur Creveling."

John Wilson laughed harshly and scornfully.

"You are going crazy," he said. "So you have got the notion into your head that that fellow is your brother's son! I wondered what was the matter with you, and would never have thought of such an absurdity as that. You are far out of the way; but there is no use in talking to an obstinate man. Bill Branch is dead—you may be sure of that. Bob Burrage had a grudge against him, and shot him down, and that is the last of him."

Though Red Jack was so positive in making this assertion, he soon had cause to retract it.

The day following

killed him. I was up in the hills this morning, and there I saw him scouting around, as well and lively as ever."

Burrage whistled.

"No mistake about that, Cap?" he asked.

"Not a bit. I saw him as plain as I see you, and I know it was the man."

"So you naturally allowed that I had told a blazin' big lie. It must ha' looked that way, Cap, and I don't blame you. But I told you the squar' truth, fur all that. I did shoot that slippery young customer, and he tumbled down into the deepest kind of a hole, and I looked down thar, but couldn't see hide nor ha'r of him, and how he ever squeezed out of that scrape is one of the puzzlin'est things in natur'."

"He is alive and active enough now," muttered the old man, who could not help being convinced by Burrage's statement.

"Sorry to hear that, as I owed him a grudge, and thought I had settled the bill. But that's bigger news than that, Cap—news that's fit to jerk the eye-teeth right outen yer head. I've had a message from 'Pacheville."

"Anything going on thar?" asked Wilson.

"It's done gone on, the worst kind. You know you sent Sam Byers and his friends up thar to crack a safe."

"I did not send them. It was their own plan. I merely let them know when John Crafton would be away from home."

"Yaas, and you had to go all the way to 'Pacheville to find out, when I reckon you mought have told 'em just as much without goin' a step from Tenspot Gulch. That was mighty kind of you, old hoss."

"What do you mean, Burrage? You have got a queer way of talking lately. Has anything happened to the men?"

The sneer that came into Bob Burrage's ugly face did not add a bit to its beauty.

"Happened?" he exclaimed. "I should say happened. Them three boys has been murdered."

"Murdered!" repeated the old man.

"That's the word that fits the case. John Crafton was away—that was squar' enough—but a trap had been fixed fur 'em—the worst kind of a dead-fall. The safe was loaded, jist b'ilin' over with pistol barrels and bullets, and when they opened the door the battery let fly and slaughtered 'em."

"Did it kill them all?" eagerly asked Wilson.

"Dead as nits, every mother's son of 'em."

"I am sorry to hear that; but I hope you don't blame me in the matter, Bob. I could not have known of the battery in the safe."

"Nobody could have known anythin' about that, Cap, except the man who fixed it, and that man was John Crafton; but it happens that I know that John Crafton and Red Jack Wilson are the same man!"

CHAPTER XXX.

DOUBTS AND DISCOVERIES.

BILL THE BLIZZARD was in no hurry to take advantage of his discovery of the rear entrance to Red Jack's den. As Felipa had said, it was best not to make any attempt to follow up that find until Dave Hillyer should return from Apacheville.

In the mean time Bill did not find the time hang heavily on his hands, as he was with Marta, and she loved him. Those few words will sufficiently explain his occupation.

He had wandered away from the camp with Marta and the two lovers were walking in delightful proximity, when Hillyer suddenly came upon them.

"How's this, Bill?" was the greeting of the dandy from Topnotch. "Have you been playing a game on me?"

"No game at all, pard, except that I tumbled into a hole, and Marta believed me to be dead, and so I happened to get hold of some good news that I might have missed."

"Just so," mournfully replied Dave. "'Twas ever thus from childhood's hour. I don't know why it is that no girl I ever fancied could take a liking to me. I suppose this was to be, Bill, and it's no use to cry over spilt milk. So I am glad for your sake and sorry for my own."

"You see, Mr. Hillyer," suggested Marta, "that I have known Bill a long time."

"Oh, no apology is necessary, bless your heart! As you were not for me, I am glad that my partner is the lucky man. If I can't be your lover, Marta, I may try to prove myself your next best friend, and that I hope to do. Come back to the camp with me, now. I am just in from Apacheville, and have some big news for you."

"What is it?" eagerly asked Bill.

"Your friend Felipa must hear it. It is very strange, and I want her opinion."

In Felipa's tepee Dave Hillyer opened his budget of news, explaining how he had made the acquaintance of the young man who called himself Arthur Crafton, and had found him dead in the house to which he had followed Sam Byers and the two train-robbers.

Marta listened to this recital with the intensest interest, but was hardly more excited than Felipa appeared to be.

"I knew Arthur," said the girl. "That is, I never saw much of him, as he was away from Apacheville most of the time, and I supposed him to be at school somewhere. Mr. Crafton told me that he was Arthur's guardian, though Arthur always spoke to him as if he was his father. So did I, for that matter."

"He is done for now," remarked Dave. "I judge that he tried to rob Mr. Crafton's safe, to get money for gambling and drinking, and received a dose which the old man had prepared for somebody else. But that is only the beginning of the story."

"What next, Dave?" asked the Blizzard.

"The next point will be likely to surprise you. My three birds got their eyes open to a game that had been played on them, and they told me plainly what it was. They said that the job in the safe that killed the young fellow had been put up for them, and that the man who put it up was no other than Red Jack, the ruler of Tenspot Gulch. They went on to say that Red Jack, whose name is John Wilson, is John Crafton—that the robber of the Gulch and the capitalist of Apacheville are the same man."

"That is it!" exclaimed Felipa. "That explains the whole affair. John Wilson brought the English-

man on here because he wanted to palm off his boy upon him as the son of Arthur Creveling. But Red Jack was not to be so easily swindled, and that is why he is kept a prisoner."

All looked with amazement at Felipa, whose interest in the matter of which she spoke so glibly was quite unaccountable.

"You seem to know more about it than any of us, Felipa," remarked Bill Branch.

"There are some things that I know. But what puzzles me is, where did Marta come from, and how did John Wilson get hold of her?"

"There is another point that seems to me to be of more importance to us just now," said Hillyer. "You know, Bill, that I wanted to pick up those scamps because we believed that they were guilty of the murder of Sile Brunton. I am now satisfied that they had nothing to do with his death."

This statement brought out a chorus of exclamations of astonishment.

"Did you believe what they told you, Dave?" asked the Blizzard.

"I had to. The way they took it when I charged them with Sile Brunton's murder, and the straight story they told me about the affair, convinced me that they were innocent of that crime. They admitted that they were after him that night, to force him to a settlement of a matter which they would not explain, but which I suppose I understand well enough. They expected to waylay him as he went home. Instead of that they came upon his dead body. They went through his pockets, and took out a big pile of money, which they claim they had a right to take. Then they went off, and left the body to be found by the next comers. I believe they told the truth."

Marta's face, as her three companions glanced at her, wore a strange and ghastly look.

"So we are all at sea again," remarked the Blizzard.

"Yes—out of sight of everything but Marta."

"Why, Dave, you don't mean to say that Marta was the cause of Sile Brunton's death?"

"Of course not; but I do mean to say that she is the only person under suspicion now; and that I don't know what to make of the case. The people at Apacheville were hot against her when I left them, and were talking of offering a reward for her capture."

"They may offer what they please, Dave; but they won't get her. The truth will come out in time, if we have patience to wait, and while we are waiting we had better attend to the ease of the Englishman."

"That's it!" exclaimed Felipa. "Strike at Red Jack, and you strike at the heart of the whole business. I have shown you how to reach him."

"You have, indeed, and all we need is a little more help."

"That is what I have brought," said Dave Hillyer. "Four good fellows came with me from Apacheville, and are ready for business."

"Four may do at a pinch; but four is not a crowd."

"Then I count you as three, and myself as three more, and that makes ten."

"Ten ought to do the work. You make me ashamed of myself, pard."

"That is not all, Bill. My two train-robbers are under guard at Apacheville, to await a requisition from Missouri; but I got Sam Byers off, and sent him to Tenspot Gulch, to settle his quarrel with Red Jack, and there is likely to be a big rumpus in the enemy's camp. Byers should be there to-night, and we ought to be on hand to take advantage of the row."

"That is what we will do, Dave. Now let us go and speak to the men you brought."

The attacking party, fully armed, and provided with torches, crossed the plateau before nightfall, and descended into the ravine that led to the haunt of Red Jack's marauders.

Felipa, although she would not permit any of her Apaches to be mixed up in the affairs of the white men, wanted to accompany the expedition, and Marta was also anxious to make one of the party; but the leaders would not consent to this, and the women were left behind.

When they reached the end of the long and dark passage, Bill Branch commanded silence, and he and Hillyer listened for what they might hear on the other side of the rock walls.

"Sam Byers is there," whispered Dave. "His voice is raised in a hot quarrel with somebody."

"The row has begun, and we are in time," said the Blizzard. "Get ready, boys, and follow me when I give the word."

CHAPTER XXXI.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

RED JACK started back when Bob Burrage flung that accusation in his face.

It was no wonder that the old man turned ghastly pale; for the charge, if it could be proved to the satisfaction of the gang, would convict him of such treachery that he might look for nothing less than death at their hands. And it was made so positively and boldly that there must be real knowledge to back it.

But Red Jack was not a man to be easily cowed, or to yield an inch of ground without a struggle.

The first shock of the fatal accusation over, he stood at bay, ready to defy his accuser and to dare him to do his worst.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "You had better be careful what you say, Bob Burrage."

"So I am keeferful," sneered the big ruffian. "I know that them's words with the bark on—the knotiest and knurliest sort o' words. But I am ready to back 'em up, and you needn't go down fur a pistol, 'cause I kin shoot as quick as any man. You're found out at last, old hoss, and the best thing you kin do will be to climb down easy."

John Wilson had regained his composure, and it occurred to him that Burrage's accusation must be mere guesswork; that he could have no possible means of proving it.

"I have noticed for some time past that you have had a spite at me," said he, "and this is the way you have chosen to work it out. You will have to prove your words, now, or eat them, and I want to know what reason you have for bringing such a charge against me."

"Well, Cap, the boys is satisfied of it, and that's the word they sent me."

"Are you crazy? You talk as if you had lost your wits. What boys are you speaking of?"

"The three fellers that you fixed up the trap for."

"Sam Byers and his friends? You told me that they were dead."

"Well, Cap; I guess I must ha' stretched it a leetle on that p'int. Them three fellers are alive and well, and as safe as the 'Pacheville jail kin keep 'em."

"What did you mean, then, by telling me such an infernal lie? You surely must be crazy."

"No, Cap; I ain't crazy. I felt pitiful toward you, bein' you're an old man, and wanted to break the real facts to you sorter gently."

John Wilson was completely bewildered. He seated himself on a rock, and stared at the man who had puzzled him.

"This is too much," he said. "What sort of a rig are you trying to run on me, Bob Burrage? If you mean it for a joke, you are carrying it a little too far."

"It ain't no sort of a joke, Cap," replied Burrage. "It's jest as dead 'arnest as anythin' I ever put my tongue to. The reason them fellers didn't get killed was because the battery shot off afore they got thar, and it was somebody else that was wiped out."

"Somebody else? Who was that?"

"That's the hard part of the story, old man. It was a young feller, a sort of a relation of yours, in the guarden line, as I mought say."

"What do you mean, man? Speak out plainly, and tell me who it was, or I will shoot you dead in your tracks."

"That's two of us as kin shoot, Cap, ef it comes to that; but you needn't put on any frills over me, who's only givin' you this thing as squar' as a die. The young feller who was wiped out by your battery was the same young feller who has been seen about this roost, and you called yourself his guarden. The same young feller who has been seen about 'Pacheville, and who said thar that John Crafton was his guarden. You know the young feller well enough. His name is Arthur."

The last words uttered by Bob Burrage fell upon unconscious ears. John Wilson had sunk against the rock with drooping head. The blow had stunned him. The boy for whom he had worked and plotted so many years was dead, and his own father was responsible for his death. It was no wonder that the tough old sinner swooned.

"I hope he ain't croaked," said Burrage, as he noticed the condition of his victim. "It would never do for him to leak out afore he settles up. Say, old man, what sort of a game is this you are givin' us? You've got to stir out of this now, and tend to business."

But sharp speeches and hard shakes had no effect upon the unconscious man, and Burrage, who found the situation beyond his capacity, was obliged to call some of his comrades, to whom he briefly explained that Red Jack had "keeled over" after telling a bit of bad news.

There was no water handy, and it is not likely that the idea of using water in such an emergency occurred to any of those men. The fluid with which they were the most familiar, and which was the most plentiful there, was whisky, and it was forthcoming freely enough.

A few drops were poured down the old man's throat, which protested so sharply against the infliction, that he was aroused from his swoon. He sat up and stared about, and the change that had come into his face awoke the compassion even of Bob Burrage.

"My boy is dead," he feebly muttered, "and I care not what becomes of me now."

There was a brief interval of silence, and he arose and started toward the entrance of the cavern.

"What's up now, old man?" asked Burrage.

"Whar to you allow to go to?"

"I'm going to my boy."

"Reckon not. You couldn't do him a bit of good, since he's been drilled full of holes by that battery of yours, and the coroner mought ax some questions that it would bother you to answer. We've got some accounts to settle with you afore you see the outside of Tenspot Gulch, and I am expectin' Sam Byers here every hour. So you may jest go back and keep comp'ny with your Englishman."

"What sort of accounts?" asked Wilson.

"Why, you see that them three fellers, when it was made clear to 'em that Red Jack and John Crafton was the same party, tumbled to your racket at once, and knew what sort of a trap you had set for them. It wasn't your fault that it failed to ketch them, but the young feller made the mistake of goin' to the safe a leetle too soon. That's a score that they've got to settle with you. Two of 'em are locked up jest now; but Sam Byers sent word that he would be foot-loose to-day, and when he strikes the Gulch thar'll be a general windin' up of business. So you see, Cap, that we can't allow you to skip out."

The old man hesitated, and looked around irresolutely. Then he turned and walked slowly back to the rear of the cavern to the apartment he had assigned to Howard Creveling.

That gentleman had been impatiently pacing the rocky floor, stopping now and then to listen, but unable to catch the meaning of what was said outside.

When John Wilson entered, his prisoner at once knew from his changed appearance that something unusual had occurred to throw him off his balance.

"Why, Wilson, what is the matter with you?" he asked. "What has happened? You look as if you had had a shock."

"I have had a fearful shock, Mr. Creveling. May I sit here with you awhile?"

"You are the best judge of that. I am not the master here, nor even a guest."

"You are no longer my prisoner. As far as I am concerned you are free to go where you please and I have not even the face to ask you to par-on me for the wrong I have done you."

"This is a sudden change, Wilson. What has happened to produce it?"

"The cause for which

Bill the Blizzard.

to be Arthur Creveling this news would have touched me more closely; but I am sorry for your sake. Was he your own son?"

"No matter who he was. He is dead, and death settles all questions. I tell you again that you are no longer my prisoner."

"I hope that no other person will care to keep me here, and I must settle that point at once."

The Englishman stepped out into the main apartment of the cavern, and was walking toward the entrance as if to leave his prison, when he was stopped by Bob Burrage.

"Whar you bound fur, stranger?" asked the big marauder.

"I am going to leave this place. John Wilson says that he does not wish to keep me as a prisoner any longer."

"Like enough; but we may hav to keep you. The old man brought you here fur his private puddin', it seems; but we may want to take a taste. Anyhow, you had better wait a leetle longer, and you may jest go back thar and cool down."

Finding himself thus rebuffed, and knowing that it would be useless to try to force his way out, Mr. Creveling sauntered back to where John Wilson was seated.

"It won't do, Wilson," he said. "These wolves of yours claim me for their mutton now."

There was a sudden light in the old man's eyes as he looked up. He rose, and stood firmly on his feet.

"All is not lost!" he exclaimed. "The game is not out until it is played out. These men are all my foes, and I can face them down yet. They have put you in the same boat that I am in, Mr. Creveling. They mean to hold you for a heavy ransom, and even if you pay it you may not escape them. Join me against them, and we can both go free, and then your affairs shall be settled to suit you."

"So they have turned against you, have they?" replied the Englishman, beginning to suspect the truth. "What do you want me to do?"

"Here are pistols, two revolvers for each of us. I have kept them here for a time of need, and they are in good order. We can shoot down the leaders as they come in here, and then fight our way out. Take your choice of the pistols."

Howard Creveling shook his head.

"It is your best chance, if not your only chance," insisted the old man.

"Ah! Perhaps so, and perhaps not. I really cannot see, John Wilson, why I should risk my life for you. The odds seem to be much too heavy, and I have had reason to believe that I would be quite as safe in their hands as in yours. I think that you hav better fight your own battles, and that I will take my chances."

"Hark! Sam Byers has come. You will soon know what they mean to do. Do you hear them?"

Voices could plainly be heard outside, and that of Bob Burrage was the loudest of all.

"Here you are, Sam! How's the boys?"

"Well enough, but in a bad scrape, and madder'n a stack of hornets."

"We'll do the stin'gin' fur 'em. Let's go right in and squar' up accounts with old Satan."

"I am keen to settle with him. Is the Englishman here?"

"Yes, and we will make a stake out of him, too."

"I believe you may give me one of those pistols, Wilson," said Howard Creveling. "I may find a use for it before this discussion is ended."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BLIZZARD UNDER GROUND.

WHEN Burrage and Byers, followed by the rest of the marauders, reached the rear portion of the cavern, they found themselves confronted by Red Jack with a leveled revolver.

"Halt, there!" ordered the old man. "I have the drop on you here, and I warn you that I will fire if you take another step forward."

"That don't scare us for a cent," replied Sam Byers, though he discreetly halted. "But we haven't come here to kill you, Cap, or to hunt a fight. We want to have a plain talk and a square settlement."

"Stand where you are then, and you will find me as square as you can claim to be."

The mutineers could not help seeing that the man they had cornered held a slight advantage over them. But one of them could face him at a time, and his shot meant sure death to the foremost, if he should be provoked to fire it. Besides, there was the Englishman, whose attitude was uncertain. It was quite natural that they should hesitate about driving a desperate man too far.

"A square settlement, that's what we want," said Byers. "All that Bob Burrage told you about the Apacheville business was true. The boy is dead, riddled with bullets from your battery; but it missed the men it was loaded for. But I can afford to drop that. It is for the rest of the gang to say what such treachery deserves. I know for certain, now, what I had been suspecting for some time, that you and John Crafton are the same man."

"Suppose that to be so," replied Red Jack, "was there any harm to the gang in that?"

"No great harm, perhaps, if you had done the square thing. But the fact is that John Wilson has been getting our money here, and John Crafton has been soaking it away in Apacheville. We have been doing the work and you have been getting the profit. I suspected you of stealing from the gang some time ago, and it was for that reason that I quit off. I came back because I thought you might be made to pony up."

"It is true that I have made money," said Wilson; "but it was as a business-man, and by speculating."

"Yes, and we are the durned fools who furnished the capital and never shared the profits. There are drafts to be accounted for, too, and stocks, and bonds, and other valuable papers that we have got in one way and another, and that have been turned over to you."

The old man protested that he was able and willing to account for everything that had been placed in his hands on behalf of the band.

"But we don't want any of your swindling accounts. We know just how you would fix it up. This thing would be set down as no good, and that would have a heavy discount, and t'other would be

forgotten, and so it would go. We don't believe in the bookkeeping that John Crafton has done for Red Jack."

"What do you want me to do, then?"

"Just write us a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, ag'inst John Crafton's account in the bank at Apacheville, and we will call that part of the business square. Is that right, boys?"

"That's the ticket, Sammy," responded Bob Burrage, and there was a chorus of assent behind him.

The old man declared that he had not that amount of money to his credit.

"Write the check, and we'll take the chances on that," replied Byers.

"When you get the check, will that end the business? Will I then be free to go where I please?"

"Well, I can't exactly say about that. There's the trap you fixed up for me and my pards, and I reckon a kind of a 'vestigation committee—"

"That will do, Sam Byers!" exclaimed Red Jack, as he stood with his eye fixed on the man before him, and his finger on the trigger of his pistol. "I know well enough what I am to expect at your hands. You are responsible for all this trouble. You left the gang because you were not allowed to lead it, and you came back with those two men to raise a row here and pay off your old grudges against me. I want to know, now, if the men of Tenspot Gulch are going to start that sort of a deal."

There was some murmuring on the outside; but it was overborne by the hoarse voices of Bob Burrage and his friends, who declared that Byers was in the right, and that they would stand by him.

"Then there is but one thing left for me to do," said the old man. "If you think that I mean to let you rob me of my property and then take my life, you are mistaken in the man. Better take my life at once, if you can."

"Of course we can kill you if we want to," replied Byers. "Do you think you could make a fight against these odds?"

"I know that I would not be the first to go under."

Outside there was a pressure against Sam Byers; but nobody seemed anxious to push him aside and take his place. Howard Creveling, who was in a shadowed corner, quietly cocked his revolver, Byers's right hand, which had been edging toward the pocket of his sack coat, dropped into it.

"Look out!" exclaimed Red Jack. "Don't you dare to draw that pistol!"

There was a slight movement of the hand in the coat pocket, and two shots were fired almost simultaneously. But the old man was the first to pull trigger, and Sam Byers fell backward, shot through the brain.

Again and again the old man fired; but a volley of shots came pouring through the narrow passage, and he sunk upon the rocky floor.

The Englishman braced himself to defend his life as the marauders surged in.

They were met by an unexpected obstacle.

As if he had sprung out of the solid rock, a tall young man faced them, with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"The Blizzard!" exclaimed Bob Burrage, as a bullet crashed through his skull.

Another foe started up before the astonished men of Tenspot Gulch, and another, and another, and before they could recover from their surprise the air was thick with flying bullets, and heavy with the smoke of burned powder.

Bill the Blizzard fully maintained his reputation as the quickest and surest shot in that region, delivering his fire from both his revolvers with such rapidity and accuracy that the men before him thought of nothing but getting out of the reach of his unerring aim.

Howard Creveling, excited by the combat, and anxious to do his share of the work, ran out after them.

But the marauders speedily recovered from the panic into which they had been thrown by the sudden appearance of the lightning shots. They knew that they were on their own ground, and felt that they were in a struggle for life.

As the Blizzard dashed out into the large cavern, he was met by a volley of shots that forced him to seek cover. His example was followed by his friends, and the fight became a struggle from hole to hole, and corner to corner.

The cavern was poorly lighted, and the outlaws had the advantage of a perfect acquaintance with the locality. But they had lost their leaders, and their ranks were already thinned, and the sudden and mysterious onset had demoralized them.

Hunted from hole to hole, and from corner to corner, some of them were shot down, and the remainder were driven back to the lake, and the final struggle took place at the edge of that dark and gloomy sheet of water.

Bill Branch, on his knee behind a point of rock, was charging his revolver from his cartridge-belt, when a shot struck the pistol from his hand and knocked him over.

The next instant a burly outlaw jumped upon him with an uplifted bowie-knife.

Howard Creveling, perceiving the peril of his young friend, rushed forward and threw himself upon the Blizzard's foe, receiving the knife in his left arm.

But with his powerful right fist he knocked the man senseless, and had strength enough left to whirl him over the edge of the rock into the lake.

When Branch rose to his feet the struggle was at an end.

One of the men from Apacheville had been killed, and Dave Hillyer was the only member of the party who was not more or less severely hurt. Of the outlaws a few had escaped by swimming the lake, two were prisoners, and the rest were lying about the cavern as they fell.

"Was it you who helped me out of that scrape, Mr. Creveling?" asked the guide.

"Well, I was there," replied the Englishman.

"Why, sir, he has cut you badly. Give me your handkerchief and let me tie up your arm."

Bill cut open the Englishman's coat sleeve, and

quickly bandaged his arm so as to stop the flow of blood.

"That will do for the present," said he, "and we will soon have it dressed for you. I am glad that this job is done."

"I am glad, too, and that it has been so well done."

"John Wilson? Oh, that is Red Jack, the ruler of Tenspot Gulch. I hope he is not dead, as he may be needed by more than one we know of. Let us go and look him up."

They found the old man badly wounded, but fully conscious. He recognized them, and was surprised when they both expressed their gratification at finding him alive.

"Life is of no use to me now," he said; "but I may be able to atone for some of the wrong I have done if I live a little longer. I must get out of this place first. It is like hell to me."

A litter was made of blankets, and he was taken out at the hole by which Bill Branch and his party had entered, and was carried along the narrow passage toward the head of the ravine.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHO KILLED SILE BRUNTON?

FELIPA and Marta were disappointed at not being allowed to accompany the expedition that went down the ravine; but it was not the disappointment alone that made them uneasy and restless.

Marta was anxious about her lover and disturbed by the revelations that Dave Hillyer had made on his return from Apacheville.

"I am afraid that I am a very unfortunate girl," she said, as she sighed heavily.

"How can you be unfortunate," asked Felipa, "when you love such a brave and handsome fellow, and are sure that he is all your own?"

"Ah! but his life is so full of dangers; and now he has gone in search of the man who has cared for me ever since I can remember, who has been like a father to me, the only father I have known. If he finds him I am afraid that he will kill him or be killed by him."

"Why, Marta, that man deserves killing. He is Red Jack, the terror of travelers, the leader of the worst gang of scoundrels that has cursed this country."

"Is that possible? He has always been kind to me, and I have called him dad, and I find it hard to believe that he can be such a monster."

"For my part, Marta, I see no reason to doubt it. The friends who have dared and done so much for you would not lie to you. The only question that troubles me is, where did you come from, and how did that man get possession of you?"

"That is what he never told me. Until lately I had supposed him to be my father, but he told me not long ago that I was the child of a friend of his."

"A friend? He had a friend once—the best friend he ever had. There are strange thoughts in my mind, Marta, and I am afraid to speak them. If I could see that man now perhaps he might tell me the truth. If I had him in my power I would wring it from him."

"How strangely you talk, Felipa! What do you know of him? What interest have you in him or his affairs?"

"I cannot tell you that—not now, at least. I am very impatient and uneasy. I wish I could know what is going on down there. How can I wait?"

"I am very uneasy, too—anxious and fearful. Why need we stay here, Felipa? Let us go to the ravine—not down there, but in that direction—that we may meet them when they return—if they do return."

"Let us go, Marta. We may at least walk over the plain. There is no harm in that, and we may walk off some of our restlessness."

They walked from the camp together, but had not got more than half-way to the head of the ravine, when Marta stopped and uttered a startled cry.

"What was that?" she exclaimed, under her breath.

"What was what, my child?"

"Did you not hear it?"

"No, I heard nothing."

"I was afraid it was some wild beast. There it is again!"

It was a wailing moan, and Felipa's quick ear at once decided that it was not the cry of any wild beast.

She stepped forward to a mass of rock, by the side of which lay a boy, ragged, barefooted, and evidently worn out by exhaustion and lack of food. His hair and eyes were black, and his complexion was dark; but Felipa declared that he was not an Indian.

"I know him," said Marta; "his name is Pedro, and he used to keep house for Sile Brunton."

The boy opened his eyes and looked up, and there was a smile on his shrunken features.

"I thought I was dead," he said, "and had gone to heaven, and the Blessed Virgin came to me."

"It is I, Pedro—it is Marta of the Casino. Don't you know me?"

"Oh, yes," he feebly replied. "I know you well. Heaven has sent you to me. I was trying to find you, but was so hungry and tired that I could go no further, and I lay down here to die."

"Why were you looking for me, Pedro?"

"I have something to tell you. But I am so weak."

"We must get him to the camp, Felipa, and take care of him. Can we carry him?"

"I can walk," said Pedro, "if you will help me."

They raised him to his feet, and each held an arm as they slowly walked back to the camp.

He was taken into Felipa's tepee, and she hastened to give him a refreshing drink and prepare him some food. In a short time he was so far revived that he could sit up and converse freely.

"I am so glad that I have found you," he said,

"What did you do after he was dead, Pedro?"
"I ran away, because I was frightened when I saw him die."

"Do you know, then, who killed him?"

"Oh, yes; I know all about it, and that is what I wanted to tell you. I was out that night, watching for him, because I knew he would be drunk, and was afraid he would get into trouble. I saw him come out of the last saloon he stopped at, and followed him as he started toward home. I saw him hide at the side of the road, and I hid and watched him. Then you came along, and he started out to catch you. I was going to run over and try to help you; but he was drunk, and you got away from him so easily that I kept hid. He looked after you a bit, and turned as if he meant to go home, but didn't leave the place. Then he staggered forward, and picked up something that lay on the ground. It was a pistol, and I suppose you had dropped it, as I never saw him have such a pistol. He looked around again, muttered a few words, and then quickly put the pistol to his head, and fired. He fell all in a heap, throwing the pistol from him as he fell."

"Merciful heaven!" exclaimed Marta. "So the man who murdered Sile Brunton was Sile Brunton himself!"

"Indeed it was, Miss Marta, and nobody else."

"Will you go to Apacheville with me, Pedro, and swear to the story you have told us?"

"Of course I will, and will be glad to do it. But I have not told quite all yet. I ran up to him after he had shot himself, and spoke to him, but he did not answer me. He breathed once or twice, and that was all. He was a dead man."

"I was so frightened then I did not know what to do. I thought I heard somebody coming, and was afraid that I would be found there and accused of having murdered him. So I ran away as fast as I could run, and kept on running until I was far from Apacheville."

"When I had once run away I was afraid to go back, and I wandered about the country, and I suppose I was half crazy. After a while I heard that there was a big row in Apacheville, and that you had been put in jail, accused of the murder of Sile Brunton. Then I meant to go right on there and tell the truth; but the news came that you had got away, and nobody knew where you were. At last I heard somebody hint that you had been carried off by Bill the Blizzard, and that it was likely you were to be found among the Apaches near Tenspot Gulch. Then I wandered off to look for you, but lost my way, and had laid down to die when Heaven sent you to me!"

"Heaven indeed did send us," exclaimed Marta, "and I shall always bless you, Pedro, for coming to find me. Have I not great reason to be thankful, Felipa? Now my name will be cleared, and I shall not fear to go back and face my friends. If I could be sure that Bill would come back safe, I would be very, very happy. Don't you think we ought to see them soon, Felipa—if ever?"

"That is hard to say, my child. There is nothing sure in the work they have gone to do. But I am looking for them, and am expecting them as anxiously as you are. Hark! What is that?"

There was an alarm at the edge of the camp, and Felipa sent an Indian lad to see what was the matter.

He soon returned with the joyful news that the white men were returning, with Bill Branch and Dave Hillyer at the head of the party.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LAST OF RED JACK.

RED JACK was safely brought up out of the ravine, though he was very weak when he reached the Apache village.

He was carried into Felipa's tepee, and she seemed to be greatly excited when she knelt at his side and gazed in his face, previous to examining his wound.

But she carefully inspected the hole in his breast, and gravely pronounced her opinion, as a medicine-woman of skill and repute.

"He cannot live. He is shot through the lung, and the ball has gone downward where it cannot be reached. I think it has lodged in the spine. He may last twelve hours, but it is doubtful."

The old man had not strength enough to speak, and could only stare at her in silence.

She mixed a draught for him, which he drank, and soon fell into a stupor that passed for sleep. Felipa then busied herself with dressing the wounds of the other men, some of which were quite severe.

Branch and Hillyer noticed the strange boy in the tepee, and wanted to know who he was and how he came there, and Marta gladly told them the story that was to clear her of the charge of murdering Sile Brunton.

Both the young men examined Pedro, and were satisfied that he told the truth.

"I was convinced that Sam Byers and my two train-robbers had given me the square facts," said Hillyer; "but that put us in a deeper hole than ever, and I don't know how we would have got out, if this young fellow hadn't turned up so fortunately."

"It was more than fortunately," replied Marta. "He did not turn up. Heaven sent him to me, and sent me to him when he had broken down on the way."

Marta was so overjoyed at the safe return of her lover, that she gave little thought to the wounded man, until she and Felipa were about to lie down to get a little sleep before morning."

Then the medicine-woman asked her if she had recognized him when he was brought in.

"I scarcely looked at him," replied the girl. "There was something in his face that reminded me of John Crafton; but this man has red hair that is rather long, and John Crafton's hair is short and iron-gray. When I saw the red hair, that was enough for me."

"The red hair is a wig, my child, and under it the hair is iron-gray. This man is John Wilson, who had black hair when I knew him. It is the red wig that has given him the name of Red Jack."

"Do you think, then, that he is John Crafton, too?" asked Marta.

"I have no doubt of it, and the only question that puzzles me now is the question I have asked before—who are you, and how did you come into his possession? But he will be awake after a few hours

and will be stronger for awhile, and then, perhaps, he will talk. He must tell the truth before he dies."

The morning proved the truth of Felipa's predictions. The wounded man awoke, seeming to feel much refreshed, and was able to talk quite distinctly.

He asked for Howard Creveling, who came into the tepee, accompanied by Marta, Bill Branch and Dave Hillyer.

While Felipa was giving the old man a strengthening mixture which she had prepared, the others spoke among themselves concerning the events of the night, and the Blizzard took advantage of the opportunity to thank Mr. Creveling for the ready and daring manner in which he had come to his rescue.

"I believe that fellow would have made a finish of me," said the young man, "if you had not dropped on him just at the right time, and I owe my life to you."

"That was a small matter," replied the Englishman. "If you are what I suppose you to be, I did only what it was my right and duty to do."

"If I am what you suppose me to be? I don't understand you, sir."

"Why, you must know, my boy, that John Wilson, who lies there, persuaded me to come out here to find at Tenspot Gulch my brother's son, who should be the heir to a fine piece of property in England. Wilson kidnapped me, as you know, and when he had me in his power he showed me a lad who was, as he claimed, my nephew, Arthur Creveling. But I repudiated that young person, because I was sure from his face and form and manner that he could not be a Creveling, and Wilson kept me in captivity to cure my obstinacy. Then it occurred to me that you, the guide who brought me to Tenspot Gulch, had the Creveling features, as well as the voice and air of a gentleman. I hinted as much to my jailer, and when I learned that he wanted to have you put out of the way I was strongly inclined to believe that you might be my brother's son."

"What's that?" sharply asked Felipa, looking up. "Are you saying that Bill Branch is the son of Arthur Creveling?"

"Something like that," replied the Englishman.

"You are greatly mistaken, sir. Arthur Creveling had no son."

"And who are you, then?" demanded John Wilson, turning his haggard face toward her.

"Yes," said Mr. Creveling, "I would like to know who it is that is so well informed in this matter."

"I am a medicine-woman among the Apaches; but I was Felipa Xavarra, of a good Mexican family, and I was the wife of Arthur Creveling, until that man poisoned my husband against me, and drove me from him."

She cast upon Red Jack a look that was anything but loving.

"My brother's wife!" exclaimed Howard Creveling. "I am glad to meet you, though I find you here. Was there no child, then?"

"Yes, there was a child, and the child was a girl. You shall have my sad story in a few words. My child was named Ella Louise Creveling. When she was but little more than a year old, that man, John Wilson, persuaded my husband that I was false to him, and so worked upon Arthur that he sent me away from his house. I was so young and simple that I knew no better than to endure such treatment. I went back there once, begging to see my child; but I could only see John Wilson, who told me that the child was dead and buried, and that my husband had gone back to England, never to return.

"There was nothing more for me to live for, and I did not care what became of me. I would not go back to my own people, and I wandered about until I concluded to remain among the Apaches, who were kinder to me than the white people had been, and since then I have been an Apache. I have never grieved for my husband, who wronged me so cruelly; but I have never ceased to mourn the loss of my child."

The wounded man groaned and turned away his face.

Marta drew closer to Felipa, and took her brown hand, and pressed it between her own fair palms.

Howard Creveling took from an inside pocket the ring which Marta had given him at the Casino, and handed it to Felipa.

"My brother's wife," he said, "should be able to recognize this ring."

"I remember it well," she replied. "It was my husband's seal ring. I begged him for it, and hung it around my child's neck with a cord that I plaited of my own hair. Where did you find it?"

Marta drew closer to Felipa's side, and pressed her hand again.

"It was given to me," said Mr. Creveling, "by the girl who sits at your side."

"And where did you get it, Marta?"

"I have had it ever since I can remember, and have worn it from a hair-cord around my neck. It is only lately that I have put it on my hand. Here is the cord."

Felipa clasped the girl in her arms, sobbing hysterically and speaking to her in broken tones.

"Now I know who you are, and how you came into the possession of that man. You are my own dear child, of whom they robbed me, and Arthur Creveling's daughter."

John Wilson tried to rise, but the effort was beyond his strength.

"Will some of you lift me up?" he asked. "I have something to say, and it is hard to speak as I lie here."

He was propped up with blankets, and spoke slowly and with difficulty.

"It is all true. That woman is Felipa Creveling, Arthur Creveling's wife, and that girl is Ella Louise Creveling, his only child. I meant to tell the whole truth; but it has come out without my help, and it is no merit to me that I should tell it now. I plotted to secure the Balcombe property in England for my boy, and vowed that he should rule where his father had served."

"With this purpose I separated Arthur Creveling from his wife, and kept them apart. After his death I took care of his daughter, and brought her up in ignorance of her name and family. But I was always kind to her, and treated her as if she were my own child."

"Indeed you did, dad!" exclaimed Marta, who was more apt at remembering favors than at holding grudges.

"I was accumulating quite a fortune," continued the old man, "and I meant to give it to her, to partly replace what she had lost by me. When my plans were ripe, I sent to England for Howard Creveling, and tried to force my son upon him as the heir of Balcombe. But the scheme failed, and now all is over."

"I know that I have but a little while to live, and life is worth nothing more to me, since my boy is dead. But I may do one just deed before I die, Marta—I must still call you so—I believe that you love this young man, and I am sure that he is worthy of your love. Do you mean to marry him?"

"I hope to," she blushingly replied.

"But you will be wealthy, and your husband must not be poor. In my coat pocket you will find some paper and a fountain pen. Give them to me."

She found the writing materials, and he was propped up so that he could use them. He wrote a few lines, slowly and with a tremulous hand, signed "John Crafton" to what he had written, and feebly requested Howard Creveling and Dave Hillyer to witness his signature.

They had hardly signed their names, when he fell back, and breathed his last.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE MYSTERY OF TENSPOUT GULCH.

"He told the truth at the last; but he did not tell the whole truth," said Felipa, when the dead man's limbs had been straightened out and his body covered with a blanket.

"What more remains to be told?" asked Mr. Creveling.

"The worst chapter of all—the murder of his friend and benefactor, Arthur Creveling."

"Murder? Do you mean to say, Felipa, that he murdered my brother?"

"I do, and it was a cowardly, cold-blooded murder. I said to you awhile ago that when I went back to my husband, after I had been driven away, John Wilson told me that Arthur Creveling had gone to England, never to return to this country. I know that he lied; for it was not long afterward that I saw them together."

"I was then with these Apaches, and our village was located where it is now. One day I was seated alone on the edge of the cliff yonder, looking down into the gulch, which was not then known as Tenspot Gulch. I saw two men ride into the gulch, who stopped, alighted from their horses and ate their dinner. Then they played cards for awhile, seated opposite to each other on the grass."

"I had a good field glass, which had been given to me by an army officer to whom I had been of some service in his dealings with the Indians. I watched the two men carefully from the edge of the cliff, and perceived that one of them was my husband, Arthur Creveling, and the other John Wilson, the man who lies there."

"Suddenly Wilson raised his pistol, and shot his companion. My husband fell backward, and never moved again. There had been no sign of a quarrel, and there was no excuse for the shooting. It was a cold-blooded, deliberate murder."

"While Wilson stood there, as if considering what he should do next, a violent storm swept through the Gulch, with the loudest thunder and the sharpest lightning I ever knew. I was drenched by the rain, but stayed there, waiting for the closing scene of the tragedy."

"A solitary traveler came riding up the Gulch. A bolt of lightning struck him, and he fell to the ground, and his horse galloped away."

"John Wilson, who had taken shelter under a rock, witnessed the scene. As soon as the storm abated he went out, picked up the body of the man who had been struck by lightning and carried it to the place where he had sat when he shot his companion."

"He placed a pistol in the hand of the corpse, searched the pockets of the man he had murdered and rode away on his own horse, leading the other."

"I went back to the village to get some of my people to go down into the Gulch with me and get my husband's body; but when we reached the spot it was gone, and there was nothing left to tell of the tragedy."

"After that I did not see or hear anything more of John Wilson, and it was only lately that I had reason to believe that he had become Red Jack, the ruler of Tenspot Gulch."

Marta again drew close to Felipa, and the others gazed silently at the blanket that covered the dead man.

"I would not have supposed that he could be quite such a scoundrel," said Mr. Creveling. "He was crazed by his desire to make his son the heir of Balcombe. Let me see what this paper is, which he asked us to witness."

"The few lines which the dying man had written proved to be the last will of John Crafton, bequeathing all his property to William Branch, commonly known as Bill, the Blizzard, who was congratulated by all upon his unexpected accession to fortune."

"That is the honey that came out of the carcass of the lion," said Howard Creveling. "I do not know that he could have put his property to a better use, no matter how he came by it. I consider you a fine young fellow, Bill Branch. As you say in this country, I like your style, and I will be glad to see you married to my niece."

"And you are really my uncle?" asked Marta.

"And am I—"

"You, my dear, I have no doubt, are Ella Louise Creveling, my brother's daughter, and the heiress of Balcombe."

"I am ashamed to have been known by you as Marta, of the Casino in Apacheville."

"You need not be. That was no fault of yours, and you have proved that a lady can be a lady, no matter in what position she is placed. Balcombe is a fine estate, and I shall be proud to own you as its mistress. When will you go over to England with me, and take possession of your property?"

"That depends—" and Marta, without finishing the sentence, looked inquiringly at Bill Branch.

"It seems to me, Mr. Creveling," said that young man, "that neither of us is yet fitted to enjoy our good fortune properly. We have been brought up

in a rough country, among rough people, and I feel for my part, that I have too much of the frontier about me to be fit for such society as we might be obliged to mingle with in England. Perhaps if I should travel at the East awhile, or stay in one of the large cities, I might polish myself up, so that I would be no disgrace to you."

"And I, too!" exclaimed Marta.

"That shall be as you choose," replied Mr. Creveling, "though I assure you that I would not be ashamed of either of you as you are. The sooner we go East, then, the better for all of us. I may say, also, that the sooner you two are married, the better I shall be pleased."

Marta turned to Felipa, and took both her hands, while tears came into the eyes of the medicine-woman.

"And you, my mother," she said, "will you not go with us, and be present at my marriage, and share my prosperity and happiness?"

"That cannot be, my child. I was only an ignorant Mexican girl when your father married me, and much of my life has been passed among the Indians. I would be far more unfitted than either of you to the station to which you are called, and I am too old to learn."

"Do not say so. You are my mother. I have found you, and how can I let you go?"

"It is enough for me that you have found me, and that I know you are alive and believe you will be happy. I am satisfied to let you go knowing that you will be better off without me than with me. Besides, my people need me, and my loss would be more to them than it would to you."

The girl pleaded; but Felipa's determination was not to be overcome, and the next morning the party of white people left the village without her.

At Apacheville Pedro's evidence easily cleared Marta of the accusation that had been brought against her, and she and her friends only stopped in that town long enough to put John Crafton's estate in course of settlement.

Then Marta left for the East, to begin her new life, traveling as Miss Creveling, and accompanied by Mr. Howard Creveling, and by Mr. William Branch, who was to be known no more as "the Blizzard."

"Twas ever thus," said Dave Hillyer, as the stage bore them away. "I never loved a tree or flower, but some other fellow snatched it up and carried it off."

THE END.

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